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OR,

A Brother's Double Treachery.

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AUTHOR OF "DISMAL DAVE'S DANDY PARD,"
"THE DIAMOND SPORT," "CAPTAIN
MYSTERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FRANK SCENTS A MYSTERY.

"COME, Frank," snapped Farmer Joel Hobbs,
"it's time you was gettin' up them keows.
Seems like you never know ernuff tew start."

The boy addressed, a smart, intelligent-appear-
ing lad of sixteen, glanced at the speaker, a
look of resentment and surprise on his clean-cut
face.

"Why, Mr. Hobbs!" he exclaimed, "it was
only night before last that you gave me a scold-

HE HELD THE MATCH CLOSE TO THE PAPER WHILE HE RAPIDLY SCANNED THE
TELL-TALE MISSIVE.

ing because I got the cows before you told me to. You said that if I ever cut that caper again there would be a reckoning."

The man looked confused for an instant and then he stammered:

"Did I tell ye that? Guess I did! Wal, you left yer work t'other night. What are ye doin' now? Jest pilin' over that air wood-pile, an' I guess that can wait. When ye'r doin' sumpthin' of importance it makes a big difference. You must larn tew judge ther importance of yer work."

"But I was piling wood the other night," declared the boy, a twinkle of merriment in his eyes.

"Was ye? So ye was! Wal, never mind; I have tew keep ye doin' sumpthin' or you'd have a fine time lazin' roun'. I guess ye'd better git them keows!"

Joel Hobbs was one of those blustering, dogmatic men who think they know about all there is to be known, but who are in truth, ignorant, mean and thoroughly tyrannical. He was indeed an overbearing and wholly disagreeable man, who was heartily disliked by his neighbors. He was a brute in his own household and ruled his meek, submissive little wife with a rod of iron, to speak metaphorically.

Mr. Hobbs's personal appearance was not prepossessing. His figure was short, thick and ox-like, his face was broad and florid, and his little eyes seemed to have caught a tinge from his red hair, which stood out like bristles all over his head. When excited or angered he had a trick of running his big unshapely fingers through his hair in a way that seemed to cause every distinct strand to stand on end and made him seem like a mad porcupine.

That the farmer's wife stood in mortal terror of her husband when he was "on his tantrums," as the neighbors called his ugly fits, every one who knew them was aware. It was said that the wretch had beaten his spouse on one or two occasions when he was unusually furious, but, if the story was true, Mrs. Hobbs did not corroborate it in any way. It is probable that she did not dare to do so, or that pride restrained the pitiful confession.

Frank Frisk had been with Farmer Hobbs almost seven years. The farmer had brought him to the farm, from the county poor-house, when he was not quite ten years old. Hobbs had taken the boy on conditions, and one of these conditions was that he should not have to legally adopt him and give him the name of Hobbs.

"I'm a leetle proud of my fambly name," Joel had declared—"yes, sir, proud of it. It's a good name, and don't you forgit that! I hain't goin' tew take no poor-house scum inter my house an' give it my name, I hain't! No knowin' what he'll turn out tew be, an' the chances is that he'll disgrace the good old name. No, sir; if I take the boy, he'll keep the name he's known by now."

And so, when little Frank went to live with Farmer Hobbs his name was not changed. The "authorities" were only too glad to get rid of another pauper on any conditions.

But it was not certain that the lad's true name was Frank Frisk. His advent in Riverton had occurred when he was a babe in his mother's arms. One stormy winter night the people of the poor-house had been startled by a feeble knock at the door and a faint moan that did not seem quite like the wail of the wind. When the door was opened, a dark form was seen lying in the snow on the step.

When lifted and carried into the warm room, every one saw that it was a thinly clad woman. She was unconscious, evidently having swooned immediately after giving that moan. Held close to her breast was a half-frozen babe.

The mother—for such she was—had exposed herself that the child might be protected from the storm and cold! She had stripped her own clothes from her body and wrapped them about the babe, and, when discovered, was nearly dead from exposure.

Before morning the woman died. When she recovered from the swoon after being carried into the house she was delirious, and she was not in her right mind from that time till she breathed her last. She was constantly crying to some one whom she called Frank and begging him to come to her. That name was on her lips when she drew her last breath, and softly whispering, "Frank," she died while her babe lay sleeping by her side.

In a pocket of her dress was found a letter addressed to "Sadie Frisk" and signed "Frank." It was not dated and the post-mark was illegible, therefore it was utterly useless as a clue. The letter was well worn and was blotted where tears had fallen upon it. It was

from a lover to the object of his adoration and was filled with expressions of unbounded affection.

Riverton made a feeble attempt to discover who the unfortunate woman was, but, as the search was not very energetic, it failed signally. She was buried in a pauper's grave, and the name "Sadie Frisk" was cut upon the little stone which charity erected over the dead mother.

The baby lived—a blue-eyed, light-haired boy—and was called Frank Frisk at the poor house.

When Frank went to live with Joel Hobbs, there were those who predicted that the farmer would kill the rather frail lad within a year; but, there was one kind-hearted neighbor who resolved that the old churl should not abuse the boy. It was not long before Ezra Small discovered Joel Hobbs beating the lad in the wood-shed. Small promptly interfered, and, although he was a little man, he swore that he would lick Hobbs within an inch of his life if he ever heard of his whipping Frank in that way again.

It was really a ludicrous sight to see little Ezra Small as he danced around the corpulent body of the man who had been punishing the boy, shaking his skinny fists in Hobbs's face.

Although Hobbs pretended that he cared nothing for the threats of his quick-tempered little neighbor, certain it is that he did not whip his bound boy very often after that. But he succeeded in making Frank's life miserable in a score of different ways.

At the gruff command to "Git them keows," Frank abandoned the work that he was doing and started for the pasture. He left the farmer running his fingers through his stubbed hair and glaring after him in a manner that was far from pleasant.

"Seems's if that dratted boy will never larn northin'," mumbled the man, as Frank disappeared around the corner of the shed.

There was a strange look on the farm-lad's face as he climbed over the fence and turned down the lane.

"If it was not for Mrs. Hobbs I'd run away," declared the boy, beneath his breath. "Mr. Hobbs has never spoken a kind word to me and he does everything he can to make life a burden. He has never whipped me *real hard* since Mr. Small took my part, that time, but he does everything else he can think of and says he will kill me if I tell the neighbors. I can't stand it any more."

Frank's eyes flashed as he thought of the abuse which he was forced to endure.

"But, Mrs. Hobbs is so kind," continued the boy, after a moment of silence. "She has always been good to me. Mr. Hobbs treats her almost as bad as he does me and she never complains. She is a saint! I'm not going to run away, but if it was not for her I would."

"Look at the clothes I have to wear!" he exclaimed, as he glanced down at his garments, which were more suitable for a boy of ten or twelve than for one of sixteen. "Even these would be a mess of rags if poor Mrs. Hobbs did not sit up nights, when she ought to be in bed and asleep, mending them. And these are the clothes of Jimmy Small who is three years younger than I. Mr. Small gave them to me when Jimmy had outgrown them. If I was not small for my age I could not get into them."

One of the cows was not in her usual place near the lower bars, so Frank was forced to go in search of her. He did not call to her as he would have done usually. His thoughts were of Farmer Hobbs and his meek little and he scarcely noticed where he was going.

Finally he glanced up to find himself in the midst of a wood which extended into the pasture. He was about to call to the lost cow when, happening to glance along a natural opening that led through the bushes which surrounded him, he espied a man advancing.

In a moment the lad's keen eyes detected the fact that the person approaching was a stranger.

"That fellow don't look like a pleasant kind of a chap to meet," concluded the boy after a quick observation, and with that decision he dodged into the bushes and concealed himself.

Onward came the stranger, passing directly by the place where the boy was concealed. He was at least six feet tall and must have weighed two hundred pounds. His face looked decidedly ugly—even brutal.

When this unprepossessing stranger had passed Frank crept out of the bushes.

"I don't like the cut of your jib, Mister Big-body, and I am going to see which way you go."

Noiselessly he followed till he saw the unknown pause near a birch tree in the midst of a little glade. Watching closely, Frank saw the man

take something from his pocket and, after glancing around as if to make sure that no one saw him, reach up and tuck it into a small hollow in the tree.

The unseen watcher grew decidedly interested, at once.

"Wonder what he's putting in there," he thought.

Having made the deposit, the stranger turned to retrace his steps and Frank was obliged to hide again.

When the man had passed and disappeared, the farm-lad crept out of the bushes and stood in the path a moment looking toward the spot where the unknown was last seen.

"This is peculiar, to say the least," decided the boy. "Wonder what he did put into that tree? I am going to find out!"

He advanced straight to the tree, and clambering up to reach the hollow, he grasped and drew forth the object which the stranger had placed there.

"Jingoes!" he cried, softly—"a letter!"

CHAPTER II.

FARMER HOBBS IN TROUBLE.

FOR a moment the boy seemed on the point of putting it back, but finally decided not to do so.

"I didn't like the looks of that chap and I believe he is up to some deviltry. Perhaps if he is, this will let me into the whole business and I can defeat his little game. Anyhow, I'm going to read it."

And he drew the inclosure from its dirty, unsealed envelope and read:—

"The devil is loose! He has escaped from his guards and come this way. Look out for him."

"The devil is loose?" repeated the boy. "What does that mean?"

He sat down on the ground and puzzled over the singular message till the gathering shadows warned him that night was at hand. Then he arose and climbed up so that he could return the letter to its hiding place. When this was done, he turned away, saying to himself:

"Got to give it up now, but I calculate I'll look after that tree a little. Some one uses it for a secret post-office, that's as plain as the nose on a fellow's face. If I keep my eyes open I may find out *who* that letter was for. It strikes me that there is foul work going on. I believe I'll turn detective! Ha! ha! ha!"

Frank laughed softly to himself at the thought of becoming a detective. To Frank a detective was the embodiment of all that was wonderful. He believed that all detectives had to do was hunt down red-handed criminals, bring evil-doers to justice and receive fabulous rewards for helping to crush crime and encourage virtue. He knew very little of the world, and his knowledge of detectives had been obtained from one or two wonderful yarns which other boys had lent him to read.

With little trouble he discovered the missing cow, but it was long past sunset when he drove the cattle up the lane.

"Now I'll catch it from Hobbs," he thought.

"He will give me fits for not getting back sooner."

But, he saw nothing of Joel when he drove the cattle into the barnyard and put up the bars. Wondering at this, he entered the barn by the tie-up door. Almost as soon as he did so he heard loud and angry voices coming from the open barn-floor.

He paused and listened.

"I tell you, Hobbs," said a stern voice, "you must help me out of the tight corner I am in. It is useless for you to squirm; you must come to it."

"Hopping toads!" exclaimed the listening lad, beneath his breath. "If I am not mistaken, that is the voice of Owen Durand."

Owen Durand was said to be one of the wealthiest men in the town of Riverton, having fallen heir to the wealth and magnificent estate of old Major Durand, his uncle, one of the first settlers in the town.

"But, I tell ye I *can't*, Duran'," Frank heard Farmer Hobbs protest, in a whining manner.

"Now, don't tell me that lie, you old fool!" retorted the rich man, roughly. "I know better!"

Frank had known Farmer Hobbs and Owen Durand to have a dozen private and mysterious interviews with each other, but never before had he overheard a word that passed between them.

"Now, what's the use for ye tew say that, Duran'!" protested the farmer. "I'd like tew have ye tell me how it is that you know ser much."

"Bah! I have my eye on you all the time, Joel."

"An' what right have yew t' watch me?" There was just a touch of resentment in Hobbs's voice as he asked the question.

Durand laughed sneeringly. "There, there, Hobbs," he said, sharply; "don't try that on me. I reckon we know each other pretty well, and I am sure that you ought to know better than to ask such a question."

Joel mumbled some reply that was unintelligible to the boy. Then Frank heard one of the men pacing nervously up and down the floor.

"By Jingo!" thought the farm-lad; "I'm going to get where I can see that fun, and learn, if I can, what it all means."

He crept forward till he could peer out upon the open barn-floor and was himself in a dark corner of the tie-up where he was in little danger of being seen. The big double doors were open, and by the light Frank saw Owen Durand pacing nervously back and forth while Hobbs stood watching him narrowly.

Suddenly Durand paused in front of the farmer and spoke shortly:

"I am not going to fool with you a bit, my my man. I want some money and I know you can let me have it. Fork it over."

Joel shrunk back a step as if fearing an attack, and half-lifted his big fat hands as he retorted:

"Yew've bled me all ye'r' ever goin' tew, Duran'. Not a cent will ye git."

This was a flat defiance and the tall man glared at the squat form of the farmer in amazement, a scowl on his dark face. Finally he hissed: "Do I understand that you defy me, Joe Hobbs?"

"You can understan' what ye like," was the dogged reply.

Durand reached out like a flash and caught the farmer by the shoulder.

"Look here!" he snarled, "where would you be now if I hadn't stepped between you and the law? Another man suffered for your little piece of villainy, but you would have stood in his shoes had it not been for me."

"An' I have paid ye for that half-a-dozen times," declared Hobbs.

"That don't make any difference; I hold the grip on you just the same, and I shall use it if you don't help me over this hard place."

"That's what you allus say."

"And that is what I mean. I must have some money and you must fork over."

"But, I hain't got none!"

"I know better. You received six hundred dollars for a piece of land to-day. It is in the house now. I want it."

"Wal, yew won't git it!" growled Hobbs, striking Durand's hand from his shoulder. "Yew will ruin me if ye keep on. I'll never let ye have another cent!"

"Then behind prison bars you go!"

For several moments the two men glared into each other's eyes, hatred and anger pictured on their faces. Then the farmer said, slowly:

"Yew dasset try it, Duran'."

"We will see! You will let me have that money or the law will have its clutch on you before to-morrow night. I mean business."

"An' I never'll let ye have that money tew gamble away like yew have the rest of your uncle's forchune, nary cent of which rightfully belongs tew yew."

"That settles it," snarled the tall man. "I shall keep my word."

Durand half turned away, but, Hobbs caught him by the arm.

"Look here, Duran'," said the farmer, hoarsely; "let me warn ye that if yew set the officers onter my track I'll tell what I know 'bout the boy."

Durand wheeled on the farmer like a flash.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, harshly.

"What do you know about the boy, anyway?"

"I know things that *you* don't want tole," was the reply.

The tall man's eyes blazed.

"It's a lie!" he snarled. "You know nothing. Curse you! Do you dare threaten me?"

Hobbs retreated, putting up his big hands and crying:

"Keep away, Duran'! Don't ye dar' touch me! If ye do, I'll tell—I will, as sure as my name is Hobbs!"

But these words only made the tall man still more furious. With a terrible oath, he leaped straight at the farmer's throat, hurling Hobbs back against the partition in front of the tie-up. Then began a desperate struggle.

CHAPTER III.

BAFFLED BURGLARS.

FRANK FRISK had been a wondering witness of this strange interview, and had overheard every word that passed between Durand and

Hobbs after he entered the barn. He was both surprised and puzzled. He could not understand the meaning of some things which they uttered, while the meaning of others was only too plain. The fact that Joel Hobbs had committed a crime some time in the past, and that Owen Durand had saved him from punishment, was only too evident. And now Durand was trying to force money from Hobbs by threatening to set the officers on his track.

"Great Scott!" was the exclamation which came near bursting from the bound boy's lips.

And then followed Hobbs's flat refusal to be "bled" any more. But what puzzled the listener most was the farmer's threat to tell what he knew concerning "the boy."

But Frank was not given much time to consider these strange words just then, for the struggle between Durand and Hobbs quickly followed. The tall man leaped upon the farmer, caught him by the throat, and hurled him back against the boarding.

"Curse you!" gritted Durand; "I have half a mind to choke the life out of your villainous carcass now!"

Joel vainly tried to tear the iron fingers from his throat, and wheezed and gurgled in a fruitless attempt to speak. This seemed to delight Durand, for he tightened his grip and laughed heartlessly. It seemed that he had fully made up his mind to strangle the helpless man.

"By jingo! I can't stand this!" gasped the watching boy.

Like a cat he sprung out through the opening in front of the feed-crib. He made very little noise, and neither of the struggling men heard him. But Durand felt him directly.

"Stop that, you old skunk!" shrilly screamed the lad, as he leaped upon the tall man's back.

From the way that the boy clawed and bit, Durand might have thought himself attacked by a mad cat. With an exclamation of surprise and dismay, he released his hold on the farmer's throat and attempted to shake the boy from his back. But Frank clung like a leech, and it was several moments before the man could break his hold. Finally he succeeded.

"You little rat!" snarled the enraged man, as he held Frank by the shoulder and glared into his face. "So you dared spring upon my back, did you! Well, take that!" and, with one brutal open-handed blow he struck the boy down.

Panting and wheezing as he rubbed his ox-like neck with his fat red hands, Hobbs had witnessed the brief struggle between the man and boy and had not lifted his hand to prevent the cruel blow which stretched Frank upon the floor. Neither did he stir or speak when Durand lifted his foot as if to kick the now helpless boy.

But the ruffian did not kick.

What was it that prevented the scoundrel from doing so? Frank did not make an attempt to get out of his reach, but, as he lay at the gambler's feet, his eyes met Durand's and the man did not deliver the foot blow. There was a steady, unflinching gleam in the lad's blue orbs that seemed to check the rascal's mad act.

Hobbs looked on surprised.

"Look here, Hobbs," and Owen turned to the farmer; "do you allow this young brat to be nosing around in this way? It is evident he was spying on us, and there is no telling how much of our talk he overheard; he may know too much for your good."

"By gosh!" gasped Joel.

For a moment the two men gazed into each other's eyes, and even the gathering shadows did not conceal the look of alarm that was pictured on the farmer's countenance.

Durand caught Frank by the shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

"Now don't try to run away, you little snipe," the ruffian cautioned. "We want to know what you heard."

Frank did not remove his eyes from Durand's face, but he made no reply.

"Answer me! What did you hear?"

"That is for you to find out," was the cool answer.

Owen shook the lad savagely.

"I will find out or break every bone in your body!"

"Hold on, hold on, Duran'!" spluttered Hobbs. "I can handle that obstinate little brat—I can! Yew jest let me tackle him."

Then the farmer seized Frank by the shoulder.

"Yew jest tell us what ye heard or I'll lam ye—I will, within an inch of your life!"

But Frank maintained silence and met Joel's eye without flinching. Hobbs looked amazed.

"Do yew dar' defy me?" he shouted. "Great beeswax! Duran', git the hoss-whip."

With a harsh laugh, the gambler hastened to obey. In a moment he returned with the whip.

"You hold him, Hobbs," ordered the tall man. "I'll wield the lash!"

"Not by a hooter! I'll lick my own boy. Yew hold 'im."

"All right; suit yourself," and Durand grasped the boy by the collar while Joel seized the whip. A moment later the lash descended on Frank's shoulders.

"I'll bring him tew it! I'll make him tell! I'll make him beg!"

But for all of the cruel punishment, not a word or a sound came from the lad's lips. The dark shadows in the barn hid the unfathomable look on the little sufferer's face, otherwise Hobbs might have been awed into holding his hand in the same way that Durand had been led to change his mind even after he had raised his foot to kick the boy.

Suddenly the gambler uttered a cry and a curse, at the same time releasing his hold on Frank, who sprung away a step, and stood with clinched hands, glaring at his tormentors as a wounded beast might have done.

"What's the matter?" demanded the farmer, astonished.

"Curse him! he bit me!" replied Owen, at the same time caressing his left hand.

"I swan!"

Farmer Hobbs was amazed. He had not dreamed that his bound boy would dare do such a thing. Fixing his eyes on Frank, he thundered:

"Come here, sir!"

But the boy did not stir.

Owen Durand laughed even while he was swearing with pain.

"You'll never handle him in that way, Hobbs," he said. "It is plain to me that you have a hard case to deal with, and before you punish him further I wish to have some talk with you."

But Hobbs was reluctant about allowing the lad to escape without further punishment. However, Durand finally persuaded him to do so for the time.

"Wal, sir," said Joel, sternly eying Frank, "yew may git the pails an' milk the keows. Yew'll have tew hustil if ye git it dun before dark. Now, stir yerself!"

Frank hastened away, leaving the two scoundrels alone.

The milking was not finished till some time after dark, and Frank saw nothing of Hobbs when he carried the pails into the house. Durand's team was still standing in the dooryard.

Without eating any supper the boy went upstairs to bed. His mind was in anything but a pleasant condition. He did not remove his clothes, but flung himself upon his bed, that was near an open window at the back of the house. Lying there, he thought over the singular things which he had seen and heard within the last three hours. And the more he thought of them the more puzzled he became.

"The man in the wood, that strange letter, the talk that I heard between Owen Durand and Mr. Hobbs and what followed—I don't know what to think of it all."

And so thinking and muttering to himself, he finally fell asleep when he least thought of such a thing.

Frank was usually a sound sleeper, and for several hours he heard not a sound to arouse him; then for some reason, he started up in the darkness and listened intently—something seemed to warn him of danger.

He arose and crept softly to the window, and, cautiously thrusting his head out, looked down, too see, directly beneath, two dark forms!

"Burglars!" thought the lad.

Like a flash he remembered that Joel Hobbs had six hundred dollars in the house. The robbers were evidently after it!

For Frank to come to that decision was to act. At once grasping a heavy, old three-legged stool, he held it poised above the unsuspecting burglars.

"Hang it, Dan!" he heard one say in a hoarse whisper. "It won't come up."

"Well, here is something that will come down," laughed the lad and the stool whistled through the air, and, well aimed, it struck one of the men fairly on the back.

A cry of pain followed, and then both ran swiftly away in the darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

RESPECTFULLY DECLINED.

"My dear," said Mrs. Thaddeus Sheldon, as she looked up from the depths of a large easy-chair and held her fan silently poised for a moment,

"I have something of importance to say to you."

"I am listening, mother."

The second speaker was a beautiful dark-eyed girl of nineteen. Della Sheldon, daughter of Judge Thaddeus Sheldon, one of the wealthy and influential citizens of Riverton, was acknowledged to be the handsomest girl in that part of the country. Hers was a tall, graceful figure, and although her eyes and hair were dark, her cheeks were white and fair, with sufficient color showing through the thin skin to give them a healthy tinge. Her face was a true index to her character—intelligent and vivacious.

Della's mother was still a handsome woman, despite the fact that she had passed her fortieth birthday. Perhaps the remarkable preservation of her beauty was due to idleness; she had never done work enough to hurt her good looks, but had made it a rule to take a certain amount of outdoor exercise every day that it was possible to leave the house. Driving was Mrs. Sheldon's favorite pastime and it had done much to sustain her youthful bloom. In truth she did not look a day over thirty-five.

The Sheldons resided at Stonyhurst a handsome, old-fashioned residence, situated within a mile of Riverton village. The judge was said to be "well fixed," and the majority of the country people regarded him as a wonderful and fortunate man.

Mrs. Sheldon had summoned Della to her private room, and now informed the girl that she wished to speak to her concerning something of importance.

"Sit down, my dear," she observed, languidly; "it makes me nervous to see you standing."

Della took the chair indicated, a look of expectancy and interest on her face, for it was not often that her mother summoned her to that particular room, and whenever she did it was to discuss something that closely concerned her welfare.

Mrs. Sheldon, strange to say, looked a little nervous and flurried as she observed that Della was looking steadily at her. This surprised the girl, for in all her life she had not seen her mother exhibit symptoms of agitation a dozen times.

"Della, your father has requested me to speak with you of a most important matter—a matter that concerns your own welfare. You know that Owen Durand—"

Della interrupted with a gesture.

"Don't mention him to me, mother! You know I hate the man."

"Hush! hush! Easy, my dear! I know that for unaccountable reasons you seem to dislike Mr. Durand."

"Yes, I do dislike him," Della repeated. "I have tried to look on him with respect, but I cannot bring myself to do so. Something seems to tell me that he is a bad man."

"Nonsense, Della! All in your imagination. Mr. Durand is a gentleman and is very wealthy."

The girl tossed her head scornfully.

"I don't care a fig for his wealth," she declared. "I shall never marry a man for money."

Mrs. Sheldon smiled wisely and the fan moved with a slow, graceful motion, indicating that she had regained her usual composure.

"You are very young, my dear," observed the matron. "You think that you would not marry for wealth, but, let me tell you, money is what all the world is striving for. Of course I do not advocate that it is right for a girl to marry a man whom she cannot respect, money being the sole inducement to the union."

Della smiled quietly.

"Then there need be no argument between us, mother."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I do not and cannot respect Owen Durand."

"Nonsense, my child! Mr. Durand is a man to command the respect of every one. Do not allow your imagination to prejudice you against him. He stands very high in this community."

"For what reason, mother? Simply because he was fortunate enough to inherit Major Durand's wealth. But, people have whispered that there was something crooked about that, for it is known that Owen was a wild and reckless young fellow, and also that the major always preferred the younger brother, Francis. Some people believed there was another and later will than that by which Owen came into the possession of the major's property."

"There, there!" came sharply from behind the handsome fan. "You know that people will talk, Della. You have paid too much at-

tention to the absurd stories that have been circulated concerning the Durands. I do not believe that there was anything out of the way in the manner that Owen came into the possession of his uncle's property! but of course, people will have their say. It is ridiculous for them to slander Mr. Durand in the way that they do. There should be a law to prevent it!" and the lady sunk back into the soft depths of the easy-chair and once more her fan began its languid oscillations.

But Della was not silenced by the mother's words; instead, she seemed somewhat aroused, for, when Mrs. Sheldon paused, she went on, calmly:

"You know as well as I, mother, that people say that Owen Durand gambles. It is rumored that his uncle's large accumulations are vanishing rapidly; some have whispered that Durand Hall is heavily mortgaged as well as all of the land which surrounds it. Do you wish me to marry a gambler, mother?"

The question was put so abruptly that it startled Mrs. Sheldon. Della was watching her mother closely and could but wonder at her unusual nervousness. The woman was quite pale as she hastened to reply:

"The stories concerning Mr. Durand's gambling are probably a mass of falsehoods. He is an extensive speculator, I will acknowledge; and, although that may be called gambling, it is legitimate gambling and is respectable. Some of the greatest fortunes known were made in that way."

"And hundreds of men have ruined themselves in the same way. But, you know, mother, that it is claimed that Owen has lost vast sums at cards. Nearly always he has a gang of city bloods around him, and stories of their wild debauches are rife in the neighborhood."

"That is because the quiet country people do not understand the ways of the world. The stories which they tell are exaggerated greatly. When he is a married man Owen will probably settle down and become sober enough to satisfy the plodding people of this neighborhood."

A look of determination crept over the girl's face. Della was an only child, and many declared that she had been spoiled by her parents, who had always allowed her to have her own way. Now she declared, firmly:

"I shall never marry Owen Durand, mother."

Mrs. Sheldon closed her fan with a snap, and sat up very straight.

"My dear Della, your father and I will have something to say about that."

She spoke in a manner which plainly indicated what that "something" would be. Della looked her mother straight in the eyes as she asked:

"Do you intend to force me into an obnoxious marriage?"

The woman quailed before that piercing gaze.

"Della, my dear!" she cried, deprecatingly.

"Why do you ask such a question? You know better than that; but I am confident that you will be guided by our superior judgment."

"But, mother, you know that I love another."

Mrs. Sheldon avoided looking her daughter in the eyes, as she asked, in affected surprise:

"Love another—who?"

"Can you ask? Surely you have seen that I regard Leon Norman as something more than a mere friend."

"Leon Norman!" cried the woman with the fan, in evident amazement. "Why, he is poor! He cannot support a wife if he tries! You must be jesting, Della."

"I am not," was the firm response. "I love Leon Norman!"

"And has that worthless young upstart dared to make love to you? Why, he has all he can do to support his mother! Has he dared to utter one word of love to you?"

Never before had Della seen her mother so excited. The woman was very white, and her hands trembled. Della was astonished, for she had always thought that her mother liked Leon Norman.

"No, mother, he has never spoken to me of his love, but I have read the secret in his eyes. I know that Leon loves me, and I am sure that I love him in return."

"You must give him up!" firmly declared Mrs. Sheldon. "You and he can never be anything to each other. Your father says that you must marry Owen Durand, and I hope you will be sensible enough to consent. More than you dream of depends on your accepting him."

Della had sprung to her feet, and she now said, in a low, strained voice:

"And so I am to be forced into this marriage after all? But, I'll never—"

"Hush, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Sheldon,

who had just glanced out of the window. "Here comes Mr. Durand now."

The sound of wheels came up from the gravel walk.

"Let him come!" exclaimed Della. "But remember that I flatly decline to see him."

CHAPTER V.

A FATHER'S DECISION.

"Do not be foolish, my dear," entreated Mrs. Sheldon. "If Mr. Durand wishes to see you, why you will see him of course."

Della's eyes flashed.

"I have no desire to see him," she declared, with spirit. "I would not be able to treat him with respect."

"Oh, yes you would!" protested her mother. "You must see him for the sake of your parents if he wishes to see you. It is not probable that he will press his suit at present, so you need not fear to see him on that account."

"It is strange, mother," said the girl, slowly, "that you should seem determined on my encouraging Owen Durand when you know that I dislike him so. I cannot understand it."

"I am working for your best interest, Della. Young blood is apt to be impulsive and unreasonable. Now for my sake see Mr. Durand if he wishes to see you to-day. Do me this favor."

Della hesitated.

"If I could be sure that he would not speak to me of love," she said.

"It is not at all probable that he will to-day," assured Mrs. Sheldon, quickly.

And so, in order to please her mother, the girl consented after a time to see Owen Durand. Together mother and daughter descended to the parlor. Twenty minutes later, Judge Sheldon followed Owen Durand into the room.

Thaddeus Sheldon was a stern-appearing, solemn man of fifty-two or three. The frost of age had tinged his hair and beard, but he still looked vigorous and hearty, as a man of his age should look. He always dressed in black and wore a "Prince Albert" coat, which made him seem more like a clergyman than a judge.

Owen Durand greeted Mrs. Sheldon and Della pleasantly, and when he and the judge were seated, a desultory conversation was commenced. Della said very little, although Durand directed nearly all of his remarks toward her. After a time Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon made some excuse and retired, leaving Owen and Della together.

When the door had closed behind them, the judge laid his hand on his wife's arm, asking in a low tone:

"What is the prospect, my dear?"

The woman shook her head gravely.

"Very unfavorable," she replied in the same low tone. "The child is very obstinate, and I do not know as I blame her. I fear she will never consent to wed Owen Durand."

Thaddeus Sheldon frowned.

"She must!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "I tell you she must! My honor—my reputation depend upon it!"

"Hush, Thad!" cautioned Mrs. Sheldon. "If you speak so loud they will hear you."

She did not seem excited in the least, but looked a bit puzzled. He became calm in an instant.

"You will understand, my dear," he added, "that this is no ordinary matter. There is but one way for it to terminate, and that is in the marriage of Owen and Della."

"You have made the unfortunate fact known to me before," calmly. "I never pry into your business, or I should be tempted to ask you to explain."

"Don't ask me that! I cannot explain now; perhaps I will sometime."

"Very well. But if Mr. Durand presses his suit to-day he will meet with a direct refusal. I have done all that I can; you must take the child in hand."

The judge bowed, and without another word they parted.

Meanwhile Owen Durand was doing his best to make himself agreeable to Della. Her coolness seemed to spur him on, and within his heart he determined to win her for his wife by fair means or foul. Della saw to what his talk was leading, and tried to cut the interview short. But when she arose, saying something of an appointment, Durand arose also and approached her.

"Miss Sheldon," said he, earnestly, "I have something of importance to say to you."

The color receded from her face and she put out one hand as if to check him. He caught it quickly and held it fast.

"I beg that you will hear me, Miss Sheldon," he entreated.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "At some other time—not now!"

But, he was not to be turned aside.

"Now is the best time possible. I cannot be silent longer! Miss Sheldon—Della, listen."

"Mr. Durand, release my hand! I cannot and will not listen! Let me pass, or have the goodness to leave the room in advance!"

Her eyes flashed, but he was not to be cowed by a woman's eyes just then.

"Della," he persisted, still holding her hand.

"I have asked and received your father's consent to speak to you of a matter that has long been on my mind. It cannot be that you have failed to note that I have long regarded you with sincere admiration. My admiration has ripened into—"

"Stop! I will hear no more!"

With sudden strength, she tore her hand from his grasp. But when she tried to pass him, he blocked her path.

"My dear Miss Sheldon, I am certain you will not be unreasonable. If you will calmly listen to what I have to say it will be better for us both. I have determined to know my fate now; therefore, you must hear and decide."

She seemed to become suddenly calm.

"Very well, sir," with evident scorn, "if you have not manhood enough to respect the wishes of one weaker than you, go on. I am listening."

He shrunk back a little before her flashing eyes, but the cool, confident smile did not leave his face.

"That is sensible. I am a man of few words, and will not detain you long. As I said before, I have obtained your father's consent to tell you that I love you and to ask your hand in marriage."

Still she did not speak, but continued to gaze at him with unlimited scorn.

"You hear, Della? I love you," in a low tone.

"That is enough, Owen Durand!" she cried, with flushed face. "You cannot deceive me if you can my parents. You love me! Pahl! I can fathom the selfish motives of your heart. Were I a poor girl, you would not think of asking me to marry you. It is my father's wealth that you covet, and not his daughter."

Every word was like the cut of a whip, and, despite his iron nerves, the handsome gambler shrunk still further away. In her excitement the girl followed him a step, with one hand uplifted. Della was naturally headstrong and impulsive, and now that she was aroused, she hardly knew what she said.

"You misconstrue my motive, Della," Durand faltered after a moment.

"Stop!" she enjoined once more. "Do not dare to address me in that manner again! To you I am simply Miss Sheldon."

He bowed, mockingly.

"Very well; Miss Sheldon it shall be. You have spoken some very harsh words to me. Perhaps you may regret them when you are calmer and remember that you spoke to one who was paying you the greatest compliment that a man can pay a woman—was asking you to marry him."

There was a reproach in his voice which she could not help feeling, and for a moment the impulsive girl was silenced. But the man's next words aroused her again.

"Perhaps you think I do not understand why you have met my advances in this manner; but I know quite well. There is a person who stands between you and me—one whom you fancy that you love. He has imbittered you against me. What he has told you I do not know, but I do know that he has done me a great injury. Let him beware!"

There was a hard, deadly ring to his voice which made her shudder. She managed to gasp:

"Whom do you mean?"

"That worthless dog, Leon Norman."

In an instant her anger flashed forth anew.

"Wretch!" she cried, as she faced him boldly, "do you dare threaten him before me—to my very face? You betray your vile nature by doing so. But, let me tell you, if you injure him, I hope the curse of God will fall upon you!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the gambler, sneeringly. "I knew I was right. You do love Leon Norman! But, I swear that he shall never have you for his wife—I swear it! If he has the boldness to stand in my path, he shall wish he never was born!"

At that moment Durand's face was the face of a fiend. A shudder of horror passed over the

girl as she gazed upon his transformed features. The unwelcome suitor saw the light of terror which leaped into her eyes as she drew still further back from him, and a change came over his face.

"You need not fear me, Miss Sheldon," he said, in a low, almost sad tone. "I spoke hastily, I fear. My love for you is so great, and my disappointment so bitter, that I scarcely know what I do or say. But the time is coming, Della—Miss Sheldon—when you will know me as I am, and not as I appear to be. You have spoken harsh words to me, but I forgive you, even though you do not ask it."

He ceased speaking, turned half away, and then suddenly faced her again.

"I am going now," came slowly from his lips. "Good-by."

He made a motion as if to hold out his hand, then seemed to suddenly change his mind, for, wheeling swiftly, he deliberately walked out of the room.

When he was gone Della's strength almost deserted her, and staggering forward, she sunk upon the sofa.

"Thank Heaven!" she gasped; "he is gone!"

Twenty minutes later she heard the sound of wheels on the gravel at the door, and peeping out, she saw Owen Durand drive away.

"He has been talking with father," she murmured. "I would like to know what passed between them. Certain it is that I will never marry that man if I can help it."

Durand had been gone less than an hour when from the window of her own room Della saw Leon Norman approach the house, mounted on his favorite saddle-horse. Her heart gave a great bound and then seemed to stand still.

Leon was coming to see her, she felt sure, but she restrained an impulse to rush down to the door and greet him.

How would her father receive the young man?

She watched Leon as he sprung from the horse and, after hitching it, run lightly up the steps. Then came a ring at the bell. After that she moved away from the window and waited, expecting to be called down.

Slowly the minutes dragged by—five, ten, fifteen. Della grew restless. Half an hour passed.

The front door opened and closed—slow, heavy steps descended the steps—a moment's pause and then the sound of a retreating horse.

She sprung up and rushed to the window. Looking out she saw Leon Norman riding slowly away.

"Heavens!" she cried. "What does that mean? He is going away!"

A moment later she tore open the door and fairly flew down the wide stair-case. Her father was at the foot of the stairs. She caught him by the arm, exclaiming:

"Leon—why has he gone away?"

Judge Sheldon avoided his daughter's eyes as he replied:

"Because I sent him."

"You sent him!" she gasped. "What do you mean? I do not understand."

"Yes, I sent him away," repeated the judge. "He had the audacity to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage—the impudent scoundrel! But I silenced him shortly for I told him you were already engaged."

The girl staggered back a step.

"Engaged!" she gasped—"engaged! But I am not. Father, what did you mean?"

"I mean," said Thaddeus Sheldon, firmly, "that I have decided on the man whom you are to marry. I have given him my word that he shall have your hand in marriage. This makes you the same as engaged."

Della's bosom rose and fell like the waters of a storm-swept lake as she hoarsely demanded:

"To whom?"

And with averted eyes, Judge Sheldon replied: "Owen Durand."

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE HOLLOW TREE.

"Go it, you skunks!" yelled Frank Fisk, as the two would-be burglars vanished in the darkness. "By jingo! I wish that chair had broken the head of one of you."

A minute later Farmer Hobbs yelled from the bottom of the stairs:

"What in the name of sin's all that row erbout, hey?"

Quickly getting into his pantaloons, Frank went down-stairs and soon communicated to the farmer the startling intelligence that burglars had been trying to gain an admittance to his house. Joel listened impatiently to the boy's brief tale, and then he flatly declared:

"I don't believe a darned word of it!"

"It is the truth," declared the Bound Boy, with some indignation. "You may believe it or not, as you please. I threw the old stool down upon the back of one of the men."

"Joel," faltered Mrs. Hobbs, who had heard Frank's tale, "it may be true. Remember the money."

"Betsey," yelled the farmer, "you go to bed!"

The woman shrunk back a little, but curiosity prevented her from obeying the command.

Together the man and boy went out and looked around the house. The stool was found beneath the window, but of course the farmer found no indications that burglars had been in that vicinity.

"I don't believe a word of it," he declared. "You must 'a' bin dreamin'."

Mrs. Hobbs, peering out of the window, ventured to repeat in a hoarse whisper:

"Remember the money, Joel."

"Shet up!" bellowed Hobbs. "If you hain't in bed when I git in there, sum'thin' 'll happen, sure!"

The woman's white night-cap vanished instantly, and when the farmer entered the house, he found his wife shivering in bed.

"There, therel!" he growled. "Whut ye shakin' like thet for! There hain't bin nobody roun'; it was all that pesky boy's noshun. He never saw northin'. I've sent him off tew bed, but I'll have a reckernin' with him in the mornin'—I will, by gosh!"

"You hadn't better hurt him, Joel," faintly murmured the trembling little woman.

The irritated farmer paused to glare at her through the darkness. For at least a minute he stood there in utter silence; then, with all the sarcasm he could command, he repeated his wife's words:

"'You hadn't better hurt him, Joel.' And why hadn't I better hurt him! That's what I'd like tew know! Answer that question, Mrs. Hobbs—answer it, I say! That's right, lay there an' shiver. Yer teeth are dancin' a reg'lar clog. Hear 'em snap! Why in thunder don't you say something, Mrs. Hobbs!"

The terrified woman managed to gasp:

"I have nothing to say, Joel."

"Then keep still!" snarled the old ruffian. "Don't let me hear ennythin' further from yew ter-nite. If I do—well, we won't talk erbout that."

Despite the fact that Farmer Hobbs pretended to believe that Frank had seen no one beneath the window, he sat up the rest of the night and kept a careful watch. But the burglars did not reappear. For all of his threat to have a reckoning with Frank in the morning, the farmer said nothing to the lad about the affair.

Early the following day, Joel took his six hundred dollars and started for the village to deposit it in the bank. Strangely enough, he did not direct Frank to complete while he was away an amount of work sufficient to keep an able-bodied man busy for a week. Finding that the farmer was going to ride away without giving him any instructions, the boy ventured to ask him what he should do.

"Do!" snapped the farmer, "ye needn't do nothin'. Git up, Dobbin!"

And giving the old white horse a cut that must have filled it with amazement, Joel was whirled out of the door-yard.

"Well, I'm beat!" muttered the boy, gazing after him. "I never knew Mr. Hobbs to go away like that, before. He hasn't told me to do a single thing! What can it mean?"

For a time the boy wandered around the place, not knowing what to do, but, at last, decided to walk into the pasture. He could not keep his thoughts away from the singular letter which he had discovered in the hollow tree, and wanted to know if the letter was still there.

"Perhaps the person whom it was intended for has already received it?" thought Frank, as he hastened down the lane.

Just as the boy entered the piece of wood he saw, or fancied he saw, some one flitting through the bushes a short distance away. Instantly he concealed himself and watched.

For nearly half an hour the watcher kept quiet, but was not rewarded for his trouble. Nothing further was seen of the individual who had disappeared into the bushes.

"Well, then," decided Frank, "we will move forward again."

"There don't seem to be any one round," he muttered, as he surveyed his surroundings and listened. "It is possible that my eyes deceived me, although I was almost certain that I saw some one."

Slowly he walked down the cow-path, still on the alert, but he saw nothing. Reaching the old tree, he quickened his movements, and soon was reaching into the opening.

"Hopping toads!" he cried, "it's still here!"

His hand had touched a paper within the hollow. He drew it forth, and when his eyes fell upon it, he repeated the cry.

It was another letter!

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Frank. "This is growing mighty interesting. I'll bet a cow this is an answer to the other letter. Well, it isn't sealed, and so I'll find out whether I am right or not."

With trembling fingers he unfolded the sheet which was not concealed in an envelope. Upon the paper was some hurriedly scrawled writing, done with a lead-pencil. The sheet appeared like a leaf which had been torn out of a memorandum of some kind.

"That was written in a hurry," soliloquized the lad; "and I calculate it was written right here under this tree after the writer had read the other letter. Let's see what it says."

This is what he read:

"How in the name of Heaven did he slip you? He must be recaptured or killed! While he is at liberty I am not safe for an instant. For God's sake make every possible effort to get your hands upon him again! I will pay you two thousand dollars if you succeed in taking him before he does any damage; if you kill him, I will double the sum. Let me hear from you again."

That was all; and it was quite enough to fill the young reader with redoubled amazement. Frank stared at the paper as if fascinated.

"The plot thickens!" he muttered, unconsciously repeating the words of one of the novels which he had read and from which he had obtained his idea of detectives. "I fancy I am on the trail of a double-and-twisted mystery. There has been foul work done I am confident; but to tell just what it is, is what sticks me. The other letter said that 'the devil had broke loose.' This one says he 'must be re-captured or killed.' Whew! This is growing tragical. Everything is as clear as mud."

For ten minutes he stood staring at the paper, thinking busily. Suddenly he made haste to replace it in the hollow from which he had taken it.

"The fellow that is intended for may take a notion to call for his mail pretty soon. I guess it will be safer for me somewhere else if he does."

Without delay, he hastened to conceal himself in the bushes near by; and it was well that he did so, for, three minutes later, the very man whom he had seen deposit the first letter in the hollow tree appeared.

The watching boy suppressed an exclamation of satisfaction.

Straight up to the tree walked the stranger, and a moment later he had the letter in his hand. Quickly he unfolded it and soon deciphered its contents. When he had done this, a fiendish look transformed his evil face, and loud enough for the boy to hear, he muttered:

"Four thousand dollars is a large sum. *He shall die!*"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN IN BLACK.

PLAINLY the hidden boy heard the ominous words uttered by the evil-faced man. Frank felt a cold chill run down his back as he looked upon the man's cruel features and heard the muttered words.

For several minutes the stranger stood gazing at the letter. Finally, he turned and walked rapidly away.

When the man had vanished, the watcher was about to crawl from his concealment when he saw something that caused him to remain where he was, for, out into the opening near the tree stepped a man who had evidently been watching the evil-looking stranger.

"Jingoes! a ghost!" flashed through the boy's head.

And indeed the man did look like a ghost. His long hair and beard were snowy white, and his face was as ghastly as that of a corpse. But, out from beneath the brim of his hat peered a pair of coal-black eyes, which seemed to glisten like glittering black diamonds. His form was apparently quite emaciated, for his clothes hung loosely upon his body.

For a moment this strange, white-faced man stood staring toward the spot where the one who had received the letter had disappeared, then he lifted his thin, skeleton-like hands toward Heaven and cried in a voice that was filled with suppressed emotion:

"How long, oh, Lord, before the hour of retribution! How long must I hold my hand and allow my enemies to walk the earth unpunished?"

Strange words! The watching boy shuddered as he heard them and the further words, as the man shook his clinched fists toward the spot where the evil-looking stranger had last been seen:

"Go! go unpunished for the time. But just as true as there is a God above, the hour of vengeance is near! No punishment can atone for the suffering that I have endured. And I know now who caused it all. My treacherous brother shall feel the weight of my vengeance! Great heavens! what a demon this knowledge has aroused within me! I will follow him!"

And he hurried forward in the pursuit.

"Hopping toads!" exclaimed the lad, as he regained his feet. "This is what beats me. I am ready to give it up. No, I am not. I am just beginning to get hold of the facts of the case, although it looks a little foggy now. If I am not a natural idiot, that white-faced man is the fellow who escaped, and therefore the very one whom a certain party wants captured or killed."

"I am getting mighty interested—I am, for a fact. But, what can I do? How can I help along the cause of justice? I am puzzled more than a little. Well, I guess the best thing that I can do now is to follow that man. I may see or hear something more of interest," and, pursuing the pursuer, it was not long before he came in sight of the man in white, now trailing the man who had taken the letter from the hollow tree.

This strange double tracking did not continue, however, a great while, for Frank saw another person—a man dressed entirely in black—step out of the bushes and confront the white-faced man. The man in black was a rather undersized person, whose face was quite innocent of beard, and whose eyes were concealed by a pair of spectacles.

Immediately on the appearance of this third man the elder person paused; then the small man laid his hand upon the other's arm, and said something in a low tone. Immediately both sat down on a log near at hand.

"What does that mean?" muttered Frank, now under cover. "Here is a new-comer on the scene. Evidently he and the man with the white face are on friendly terms, or they would not be chinning in that way. I wish I could hear what they are saying. I'll try to do just that!"

The boy crept slowly forward under cover of the bushes. But it was not long before he found that he could not approach near enough to overhear their talk without being in great danger of being detected.

"I'll have to watch them from here," thought the boy, as he peered forth from the bushes at least half a dozen rods away. "If they only spoke up loud I might hear something, but they are both talking in low tones."

As he lay watching, he saw the elder man become greatly excited, while the other did his best to restrain him. The white-faced stranger partly arose to his feet, but the other drew him back to the log. Then they talked in low, earnest tones once more.

For at least a quarter of an hour the two sat on the log and talked, but during all that time the watching boy caught only an occasional word, from which he could make no sense. Finally both arose and separated, the white-faced man turning back and the man in black continuing on after the person who had taken the letter from the hollow tree.

"Jingoes!" whispered Frank to himself, "there's a split. Which one shall I follow?"

After a moment's hesitancy, he decided to shadow the man in black, but, a surprise was in store for the shadower, for as he was hurrying forward he was amazed to see the very individual he was looking for step out of the bushes not four feet away and confront him!

"Well, sir," said the small man sternly, "what do you want?"

Frank was too amazed to make an immediate reply. His face was the picture of dismay.

"And so you were following me, were you?" questioned the spectacled stranger. "What were you doing that for? I fancy you were not aware that I have eyes in the back of my head. I saw you following the gentleman whom I recently met, and I sent him back the other way, thinking that you would continue to pursue him. What are you up to, anyway?"

"Nothing, nothing!" stammered the dismayed lad.

The little man laughed, and taking Frank by the arm, said:

"Come."

Then they walked back to the log and soon both were there seated.

"Now," said the little man, briskly, "I want to ask you a few questions, and I fancy you will find it for your interest to answer. First, what is your name?"

"Frank Frisk," was the prompt reply.

"Good! Where do you live?"

"With Farmer Hobbs, who owns this pasture."

"Ah, yes, I know the old skinflint by hearsay. I take it that you are not in any way related to him?"

"You are right; I am not a Hobbs!"

"Let me see, Frank Frisk—Frisk. Yes that's the very name. Farmer Hobbs took you from the poor-house?"

"Yes."

"Your mother died when you was a babe and left you there? Am I right?"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, filled with wonder that the stranger knew so much concerning him.

The man in black rubbed his hands and looked pleased.

"The very boy I am looking for!" he declared. "I have wanted to have a talk with you for several days."

"With me?" exclaimed the farm-lad. "What in the world do you want of me?"

"Yes, you are the one, and I want to hear from your own lips all that you know concerning your past. Tell me all about your life as you remember it, and also tell me whatever you may have heard concerning yourself."

What in the world did this stranger want to know about his past life for?

He knew of no reason why he should not tell the man of his past, and therefore he did so to the best of his ability, assisted in a measure by the numerous questions which the other asked. The unknown seemed greatly interested in the recital, especially when the boy spoke of his mother as he had heard her spoken of by those who saw her at the funeral. The dark-clothed man asked Frank to describe her, if he could do so from what he had heard, and as Mrs. Hobbs had been one of those who attended the funeral, and had told him of his mother and how she looked lying in the coffin, he was able to do so.

"But, I cannot understand what you want to know all this for," the boy declared. "You are a stranger to me, and strangers do not usually take such an interest in a bound boy."

The man laughed in a pleasant manner and placed one hand on the farm-lad's arm, as he replied:

"I cannot explain to you now, Frank; but, rest assured that you shall know all in good time. There is a mystery about your life that shall be cleared up; then you will know why I, an utter stranger, took an interest in you."

"But won't you tell me your name, sir?" asked the boy.

The strange man shook his head.

"Not now, Frank."

"Nor the name of that wild-looking, white-faced man whom I was following?"

"No. You must not know his name now. More than that, I have a request to make of you. You have an honest, open face, and I believe you will keep your word when you give it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now what I want you to promise is that you will not tell a living soul that you saw any one in this wood. Will you promise? I know you will."

But Frank hesitated.

"Why do you wish me to promise that?"

"I cannot explain, but I will say that it is for your good as well as ours. We are both friends to you. You will promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Good enough! Now we must separate, for I have business that must be attended to."

They both arose and the stranger held out his hand, which Frank did not hesitate to take.

"Remember your promise, Frank," admonished the man in black. "Good-by."

"I will remember, sir. Good-by."

Then they separated, the man going on down the cow-path and the boy turning toward the highway, which was not far off.

CHAPTER VIII.

DELLA'S DEFIANCE.

THAT very morning, mounted on the back of her favorite horse, Della Sheldon was enjoying a gallop in the fresh air. Della was an excellent rider and her favorite pastime was a dash along the country roads. This she enjoyed daily when the weather would permit.

Leon Norman was also a fine rider and would often meet the judge's daughter and enjoy a gallop by her side. It is an undisputable fact that both of the young folks rode oftener than they would but for the fact that they often met and spent an hour in each other's company in that way.

Leon was a fine, manly-appearing young man of twenty-one. His face although not handsome was marked by a look of determination and natural honesty which made it a very attractive countenance to look upon. A trifle above medium height, his figure was well knit, graceful and supple, yet with something about it which seemed to indicate that the young farmer was the possessor of more than ordinary strength.

Leon and Della had been schoolmates together and as such had become fast friends. When they grew older this friendship was not broken but became firmer and stronger instead. At first the girl's parents did not complain because their child was on such intimate terms with the noble-appearing son of old Zenas Norman. In fact, they had no reasonable grounds for complaint, as Zenas Norman was at that time fully the equal of Thaddeus Sheldon both socially and financially.

But, a change came.

Zenas Norman became involved in a desperate lawsuit with Joel Hobbs, the point of dispute being raised over the dividing line between their farms. Both men were obstinate and they fought the case to the last, carrying it from one court to another with a persistency that indicated the amount of unreasoning determination they both possessed. Regardless of the final result, Norman drew heavily on his bank account; in fact, he spent money like water in order to defeat his enemy.

Just where Hobbs obtained the means to make such a desperate fight was a mystery; but, he obtained it some way, and in the end defeated Norman. There were those who declared that there was something crooked about the manner in which the final decision was obtained, but, nothing of the kind could be proved.

Then Zenas Norman, when he had paid the heavy damages which the court called for, awoke to realize that he was a ruined man. The knowledge killed him.

From that time the social positions of the children, Leon and Della, were widely separated in the eyes of the girl's parents, at least. It was not long before Leon discovered this fact, and the knowledge cut him deeply. He was then scarcely more than a boy, but he had the pride of a man.

When everything was settled, Leon and his mother found that they were almost penniless, and only a small portion of the original Norman farm was left to them. But Leon was a brave boy, and succeeded in cheering his mother with the assurance that she should not want as long as he had health and strength to work. And he kept his word.

Of course the young man was obliged to leave school and give up his ambition to go to college; but, at the same time he did not give up his studies, and he made a more rapid advancement than many of his companions who remained in school. Therefore, at the age of twenty-one he was really better informed than many a young man who had wormed his way through college. And all the while he carried on the little farm in a manner that merited and received the praise of many an experienced farmer.

The ill-fortune which had befallen Leon did not change Della's regard for her young lover in the least. It made no difference to her whether he was rich or poor; he was her ideal of all that was good, noble and true.

But the girl's parents regarded Leon in a different light after the great misfortune which befell his father. It is true that they did not forbid his occasional visits to Stonyhurst, but they regarded his and Della's friendship as merely a boy and girl infatuation which would never amount to anything. As time progressed, however, they began to realize that it was not going to be such an easy thing to separate the young people.

Finally the attentions of Owen Durand brought them face to face with the actual condition of things.

After the judge had turned Leon Norman away from Stonyhurst with the information that Della was already engaged to Durand the young girl had spent a terrible night. She loved and respected her parents, and it filled her bosom with anguish to realize what a painful position she was in. She had inherited a large amount of her father's obstinate disposition,

and therefore was not inclined to submit without a struggle to a fate against which her soul rebelled.

"I will see him to-morrow," she told herself a thousand times after Leon had been turned away from the house.

When she rode away from Stonyhurst the next morning she little thought that Durand would be the first person whom she would meet. She took a long gallop into the country without seeing any one, but, while passing along the road which skirted Farmer Hobbs's pasture she came face to face with the master of Durand Hall. He lifted his hat politely, but, when she would have passed with a formal bow, he reined the black horse which he bestrode fairly in her path.

"Wait a moment, Miss Sheldon," he commanded rather than entreated. "I wish to speak with you and I fancy I shall not find a better opportunity."

Her eyes flashed, as she said in a low, cold tone:

"Allow me to pass, Mr. Durand. I have neither time nor inclination to speak with you."

"Which is quite unfortunate as I have both. I know you will pardon me and will grant me a few moments—I am positive that you will."

There was something in his manner which seemed to say: "You cannot help it." His insinuating glance of admiration caused a hot blush to leap to her cheeks, and with great difficulty she controlled her voice as she replied in an icy manner:

"You are quite mistaken, sir; I shall waste no time in talking with you. Let me pass."

Then she urged her horse forward, but Durand's hand fell upon the bridle-rein.

"Now, don't be too hasty," he laughed. "It is not always best to be in a rush. I want to talk with you, and I am going to do so."

For a moment she came near losing control of herself, but by a great effort she succeeded in holding her wrath in check. At the same time her flashing eyes and burning cheeks told of the fire that lay smoldering beneath. Fixing a steady glance upon his dark face, she waited for him to continue.

"There, that is sensible," Durand declared. "I knew you would be reasonable when you thought the matter over. I have not much to say, and I shall talk straight to the point."

"Well, sir, if you will force me to listen, be kind enough to speak as briefly as possible. I am in a hurry."

Durand laughed scornfully:

"Yes, I know. In a hurry to meet young Norman. But he is not fit for you to wipe your dainty feet upon."

"Stop!" cried the girl, lifting her riding-whip with a gesture of command. "Enough of such talk from your lips! Leon Norman is a gentleman, which is more than I can say for you, Owen Durand, since this ungallant act," and she again sought to go on her way, but, once more his hand fell upon the bridle-rein of her horse.

"Not yet, my beauty! You will soon become my wife!"

"I will die first!"

"I repeat it—you will soon be my wife. I have the power to make you marry me whether you want to or not."

His words sent a cold chill over her, but she quickly recovered her usual composure.

"That is idle, foolish talk, Owen Durand!" she exclaimed. "You cannot force me into anything against my wishes."

"I can and will!"

"Again I say you cannot. You are a wicked man, but I do not fear you, and I defy you to do your worst!"

"By heavens! your spirit shall be broken!" snarled the angry scoundrel. "You defy me, do you? Very well, we'll see who will conquer. I swear I will kiss you now, just to show you that I am not to be trifled with in this way."

He suddenly urged his horse forward and attempted to catch her in his arms. Della uttered a cry of terror, and struck straight at his face with her whip. The lash fell across his cheek with a cut that left a livid mark behind. Then Della's horse, becoming frightened, sprang away. An instant later the terrified horse was galloping wildly down the road, with the girl clinging desperately to its mane, and the rein dangling beyond her reach.

Uttering a hoarse shout, Durand lashed his own horse into pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.

A LOVER TO THE RESCUE.

Down the road thundered the frightened horse, with the pale-faced girl clinging to its mane. Once she essayed to get hold of the

dangling rein, but she found it beyond her reach, and came near falling from her horse.

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Della; "What can I do?"

She could do nothing but wait—for what? What would be the end of this terribly unpleasant adventure?

Suddenly out from the bushes at the roadside leaped a slender, sharp-eyed boy who sprang straight at the horse's head and grasped at the dangling rein.

Frank Frisk!

The Bound Boy had seen the runaway, and recognizing the peril of the beautiful girl, he made a desperate attempt to stop the frightened horse. But, the animal saw him an instant too soon for him to succeed. His hand almost touched the rein as the horse sprang to one side; then he was knocked down and from out of a cloud of dust the horse galloped on, leaving the boy lying in the road.

When the horse sprang to one side, Della was nearly unseated, but she succeeded in remaining upon the animal's back. She had recognized the brave lad who had made such a desperate attempt to stop the horse.

"Heavens! he is killed!" flashed through her head as the horse dashed on leaving the brave boy lying in the road.

She did not dare to turn her head to look back, therefore she did not see what happened when she had passed. As she swept around a sudden turn in the road, she came in sight of a horseman who was leisurely approaching.

It was Leon!

As soon as Della saw the young farmer she uttered a cry of joy, for she felt sure that he would save her in some way. He echoed the cry and quickly wheeled his horse so that it was headed the same as the runaway. Then the whip in his hand rose and fell. One wild leap and the horses were neck and neck dashing along the road.

"Cling fast, Della!" shouted the young man. "I will save you!"

In less than a minute he had succeeded in getting the runaway by the bridle-rein; then began a desperate struggle between the man and the horse. But the young farmer knew quite well how to handle the frightened animal, and within a short time he had the horse under control. A few moments later he had brought the runaway to a stand.

"There, Miss Sheldon," said the victor, with a respectful bow, "you are quite safe."

"Miss Sheldon!" she echoed. "Leon, why do you address me thus?"

"I do not wish to be too familiar under the circumstances."

"Under the circumstances?" she repeated, in a dazed manner. "What, for Heaven's sake, do you mean?"

"Surely you should know. Your father told me all yesterday."

Then she understood his strange words. He believed her false to him.

"Oh, Leon!" she cried, holding out her hand to him; "you did not believe me so utterly false and deceitful?"

He caught her hand and kissed it.

"No, no!" he hoarsely murmured; "I could not quite believe it. Now I know you are true, my darling!"

"Leon," she panted, "they are trying to force me into an obnoxious marriage with that man—Owen Durand. I met him a few minutes ago and he insulted me. He tried to kiss me and I struck him with the whip. Then the horse became frightened and ran. He is coming now!"

She spoke truly. A rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs was followed by the appearance of the master of Durand Hall as that individual swept into view. A few moments later he drew rein before them.

"Aha!" he drawled, fixing a baleful glance on the young farmer. "So you are around, are you?"

"Fortunately, I am," was the cool reply. "I happened along just in time to save this young lady from injury after her horse was frightened by you."

"Exactly. You shall be paid for your trouble. Now that your service is no longer required, you will please let us see how the back of your coat fits."

Durand's voice was even, calm and insulting. Leon felt the warm blood rush to his face.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, sir," he declared. "This young lady needs some one to protect her, and—"

"I will attend to that, my dear sir."

"You? You are a fine guardian! Why, Miss Sheldon has just complained that you in-

sulted her and frightened her horse! I hardly think I will leave her in your care."

The gambler's face grew black.

"So she said that, did she? That is all right. She will change her tune soon."

"Never!" flashed the girl. "Owen Durand, you are making me detest you!"

Durand rode a little closer, and pointing down the road, hissed to Leon:

"Get out of this! I want to speak with this young lady alone."

"Nary get!" retorted the young farmer, quietly. "I do not fancy that the young lady cares to speak with you, and until she asks me to go, I shall remain."

Durand was furious. To be openly defied by the young farmer in the presence of the girl whom he hoped to make his wife was humiliating indeed. The scowl upon his face grew blacker and his hand crept back toward his hip-pocket, as he snarled:

"If you do not make yourself scarce at once, young man, it will be the worse for you."

"Stop!" came sharply from Leon's lips. "Have a care, Owen Durand! Do not dare to draw a revolver on me!"

The young farmer's eyes gazed straight into the gambler's dark orbs, and there was not the least sign of fear in their clear depths. Durand held his hand, awed by the fearless manner of the rival whom he now hated so intensely.

"That is right, Durand! It is best to go a little slow. Miss Sheldon is under my protection; and now, you will please move on."

For a moment the gambler hesitated, but, Leon's blazing eyes never wavered for an instant. That piercing glance, strange to say, cowed the half-intoxicated scoundrel. His hand fell away from his hip, but he hissed:

"Curse you! You shall pay for this!"

"Spare your threats for some one who cares for them," advised the young man. "I do not fear you in the least, and you are simply wasting your breath when you threaten. My advice to you is to be moving."

"I will go," said Durand, savagely. "But let me tell you, young man, that girl is to be my wife. Be careful what you do or say in her presence. Her father has promised that I shall have her."

"But I have told you that I shall never marry you," cried Della, "and I meant what I said. My father has not the heart to force me into a union so repulsive."

The villain laughed sneeringly.

"Oh-o! he hasn't the heart? Well, then, I will put the heart into him. Do you hear? I will put the heart into him! Your father will do just as I say. Because why? Because he cannot help himself. I am his master! Ha! ha! ha!"

Then he rode past them, waving Della a kiss, but scowling darkly at Leon. Giving his horse several sharp cuts with the whip, he galloped furiously down the road, and was lost in a cloud of dust.

When he was gone Della drew a breath of relief, saying at the same time:

"I am so glad he has gone! Leon, I am dreadfully afraid of that man. He has shown to-day just what he really is—a low, vindictive scoundrel. I believe that he will stop at nothing to accomplish his evil ends."

"I fear you are right," admitted the young farmer. "But let him harm you if he dares!"

"What can he have meant when he said that he was my father's master? That puzzles me."

"Oh, that must have been idle talk. He can have no control over your father."

"It does not seem possible, and yet I am at a loss to understand, to fathom father's strange actions. He does not seem like the kind, true parent of old. He is so changed."

Leon said nothing, yet he, too, was at a loss to understand Judge Sheldon's changed manner. But he would not express his fears in her presence. He attempted to turn her mind from the perplexing point.

"It is fortunate that I happened along just as I did, otherwise the runaway might not have terminated so happily."

"That is true, Leon; there is no telling what you saved me from. And that makes me think—you were not the first to attempt to stop my horse. Farmer Hobbs's bound boy saw my peril and made a brave trial to check the beast; but he failed, and was knocked down. I fear he was seriously hurt. Let's ride back and see."

To this the young farmer readily assented, and together they rode back along the road. They found Frank sitting by the roadside, near the spot where he was knocked over by the flying horse. He sprang up with a cry of delight as he saw them approaching.

"By jingoes!" he exclaimed. "I'm awful glad to see you alive, Miss Sheldon! I was afraid you would be thrown and killed."

"And I was afraid you had been injured in so bravely trying to stop Dandy. Were you not hurt?"

"I was knocked so numb that when Owen Durand came along and tried to run his horse over me I had just life enough to barely get out of his way."

"Did Durand try to ride over you?"

"Hopping toads! I should say so! He made straight for me, and swore like a pirate when I got out of the way. Oh! he meant to fix me."

"Heavens!" gasped Della. "That man is wholly wicked! I never dreamed that he was so bad."

"He is a miserable brute and villain!" declared Leon, with pardonable wrath.

"That's about the way I figure it," nodded the Bound Boy. "He's meaner than spoiled eggs."

CHAPTER X.

THE YOUNG AMATEUR FINDS ANOTHER LETTER.

FOR two days after the events just narrated Farmer Hobbs kept his bound boy so busy that the lad had no time to spend in the vicinity of the hollow tree. The farmer was in better spirits after his return from Riverton, where he had safely deposited the six hundred dollars in the bank. He breathed freer and once more went about his farming with his usual vigor.

"Crops goin' tew be poorly good this year," he chuckled. "I've bin 'tarnal lucky, for I hain't had tew pay out much for hired help so fur. That air boy's almos' as good as er man, but it'd never do tew tell 'im so—oh, no, no! that'd never do. Take 'im all roun', he's poorly vallyble, he is, for I can use him ag'in' Owen Duran' when Duran' gits tew callin' for munny. Oh, yes, he's vallyble! Ha! ha!"

And the farmer rubbed his hard red hands together and rolled his little eyes in a manner far from pleasant to witness.

As for Frank, he was decidedly uneasy and very desirous of putting his hand into the depths of the secret letter-receptacle in the hollow tree. But his master was looking after him all the time, and he found no opportunity to visit the tree.

On the afternoon of the second day, Frank came suddenly upon the farmer and Owen Durand, who were conversing in low tones and appeared very anxious lest they should be overheard. Both men looked alarmed at the boy's sudden appearance and Frank fancied that Durand flushed in a guilty manner while Joel's usually red face seemed to become redder still.

"Hello!" growled the gambler, as soon as he could command his voice. "I thought you said there was no one round, Hobbs? What is this confounded boy here for?"

"I dunno," mumbled Joel, slowly recovering his composure. "I didn't know he was roun'. Hey, you rascal! where are you going?"

"To the house for that pail of water which you told me to get as soon as I finished that row," was the prompt reply.

"Oh, yes! sart'nly—tew be sure!" nodded Hobbs. "Trot rite along an' be mighty spry 'bout it. No dawdlin' now."

As Frank moved away, he heard the farmer say:

"He didn't hear nothin', don't you worry, Duran'."

"Wonder what they are up to," thought the boy. "Some rascality, I'll bet, or they would not have acted in that way. It is plain that they were both afraid that I had heard something. What can they be talking about?"

But there was no way for him to find out, and when he returned with the water, Durand was still talking with the farmer, and the two men remained together the greater part of the afternoon.

"They are plotting something evil," thought Frank. And he was not far from right.

That night when he went for the cows he discovered that one of them was missing again.

"Good!" he softly exclaimed. "Now I'll have another chance to find out if there is anything in that hollow tree."

It was then quite late and rapidly growing dusk, but he found the cow without much difficulty, and, as he drove her back toward the foot of the lane, he came to the hollow tree. It was then nearly dark, and the boy made haste to discover if there was another letter in the tree.

Within the hollow lay another letter, which he soon brought forth.

"I thought I'd find it. Perhaps this will throw some light on the mystery. I'm resolved to solve about all these goings on and about myself—What's that?"

He listened breathlessly, but could hear no sound save the "tunk-tank" of the bell on the cow that was going slowly down the path. There seemed to be nothing else stirring within the wood.

"There isn't anybody round," muttered the boy. "I'll see what there is in this letter—that is, I'll see if it isn't too dark for me to see."

But he soon discovered that it was too dark for him to read the writing on the paper. He held it close to his eyes and puzzled over it for nearly five minutes, but, each minute it grew darker, and he could make nothing out of it.

"Great Jinks! this is a scrape! I guess I'll have to forego the pleasure of perusing this document. I ought to have come before."

Once more he held the paper close to his eyes and tried to make out the hastily-written words on the sheet, but was forced to give it up.

"It's no go," came regretfully from his lips. "I can only see to make out one or two words. If I only had a light!"

Swiftly he felt through his pockets, and a cry of delight broke from his lips as he discovered two broken matches in one of them.

"Jingoes! I am in luck! Now I'll read it or know the reason why."

Laying the paper on his knee, he proceeded to carefully draw one of the matches along on the leg of his pantaloons. It readily ignited, and he held it close to the paper, while he rapidly scanned the tell-tale missive. It read:

"Everything is quiet. Where can the lost one be? He has not appeared. You say he is in the vicinity, but I think you must be mistaken. Watch sharp and earn your money if you can. He must be recaptured or killed."

"I have another piece of business for you. You used to be pretty good at cracking banks before you entered into my employ. We have done more than one job together. Of late I have had my eye on a certain bank that it will not be hard to go through. If you are in for such work, we will—"

"Hopping toads!"

Frank had held the match till it burned his fingers. He dropped it, at the same time uttering the exclamation given above.

As the match went out the darkness seemed more intense than it really was, and for several seconds the farm-lad held his breath and listened. The lonely cry of a tree-toad and the far-away tinkle of a cow-bell was all he could hear.

"Guess I'd better be getting," he muttered. "I'd like to read the rest of that letter, but I don't dare carry it away. The writer must be a desperate man, and I don't believe it would be healthy for me if I was found with it in my fingers. By Jinks! I'll put it back."

And he hastened to refold the letter and place it within the hollow.

"There," he uttered, with a breath of satisfaction, "I'll find a way to get down here in the morning, and if that letter is not gone I will finish reading it."

He dropped down from the hollow and listened again. Save for the cry of the tree-toad, the silence was oppressive.

"I believe I'll be getting home with those cows," observed the boy. "It's mighty lonely here now. I expect Mr. Hobbs will give me fits for being so long. Ah! what's that?"

Once more he listened, and this time he was sure that he heard stealthy footsteps advancing. He heard the bushes scrape against the body of some object that was evidently passing through them.

"By gracious! some one is coming!" flashed through his head.

He did not wait for anything more, but turned and ran silently down the path, vanishing in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

A SHADOW AND A SHOT.

FRANK found all the cows standing at the bars. He made haste to open the bars, which he had forgotten to do before he went to search for the lost cow, and hurried them up the lane as fast as he dared. Farmer Hobbs was waiting at the upper bars.

"So yew've gut erlong at last, have ye!" he snapped. "Where in the name of sin have yew bin?"

"One of the cows was not at the bars and I went in search of her," was Frank's truthful answer.

"Wal, yew've bin long ernuff 'bout it. I was jest comin' arter ye, an' if I had, yew'd 'a' knowed it! Now yew hump yerself an' git the

critters milked. Guess yew'll have tew have a lantern if ye see."

Farmer Hobbs did not lift his hands to help the boy and therefore Frank was obliged to do the milking all alone. He was handy at that kind of work, however, and made a short job of it. But, for all of his swiftness, he did not escape a liberal amount of "jawing," from the churlish farmer.

"Yew hain't wu'th yer salt," growled Joel. "Yew don't do enough tew 'arn the grub yew eat, much more tew pay for havin' ye 'roun'. If 'twasn't for the look of the thing, I'd tarn ye out tew shift for yerself—I would, by gum!"

"I wish he would!" thought the boy.

When the boy carried the milk into the house he watched for a chance to speak with Mrs. Hobbs, having decided to tell her about the letters in the tree, but he was destined not to find such an opportunity that night, for Joel soon sent him off to bed.

Within his room Frank found it a difficult thing to go to bed and sleep. When he had undressed, he lay upon the bed for hours thinking of the strange events that had so recently happened. There were many things which he could not understand and the more he pondered on them the more puzzled he became.

"Jingoes!" he finally groaned; "I don't know what to do or think. I wish there was some one whom I could tell the whole business; but, there is a part that I can't tell, for I promised that strange man that I would not."

At length he fell asleep, but his slumber was fitful and broken, being filled with unpleasant dreams.

He awoke the next morning feeling tired and almost sick. The first thing that he heard was the snarling voice of Farmer Hobbs calling him from the bottom of the stairs, and he made haste to dress and descend.

"Come, now!" snapped Joel. "Was ye goin' tew snooze all day? Jest step lively now an' git them keows milked tarnal soon. They orter be in the paster this very minute. Hump now!"

And without a word Frank "humped." When the cows were all milked and driven down the lane, he heard the farmer bellowing for him to come to breakfast.

"Now I hope I'll get a chance to speak to Mrs. Hobbs," thought the boy.

But, he did not. Joel seemed more attentive to an usual that morning; in fact, it seemed to Frank almost as if the farmer suspected that he wished to speak with Mrs. Hobbs and was determined that he should not have a chance. Frank was obliged to go into the field without saying a word to the farmer's wife, and he did not find an opportunity to do so during the entire day.

That night Joel sent the boy to bed earlier than usual, for he said that they had a big day's work before them. But again Frank found that he could not go to sleep at once.

"I've got to tell some one," he muttered. "It isn't right for me to keep quiet, knowing what I do. There isn't much show for me to tell Mrs. Hobbs to-morrow. What shall I do?"

For a long time he lay on the bed thinking. Finally, he started up, exclaiming in a low tone which was filled with deep satisfaction:

"I know what I'll do! I will tell Mr. Norman. He will know just what to do. Why didn't I think of that before?"

As soon as he had arrived at this decision he also decided to see Leon as soon as possible—that very night if he could. It was yet early in the evening and Leon lived so near that he could soon reach the house. He knew that there would be little difficulty in leaving the farmhouse.

"I'll get out and in without waking a soul," he muttered, as he hurriedly put on his pants. "Neither Mr. or Mrs. Hobbs will know a thing about it."

Silently he stole down the back stairs, his bare feet making no sound. The door that opened into the shed was fastened with a hasp, and Frank opened it without a sound. He found no trouble in leaving the shed and was soon running swiftly across the fields toward Leon Norman's home.

It was not long before the boy came in sight of the little cottage to which Leon and his mother had moved after the death of the young man's father. Frank stopped short as the dark outlines of the little cottage caught his eye. He knew not why, but something seemed to tell him that there was danger in the air.

"I feel just like I am not the only one out here in the darkness," he thought. "It seems as if I can scent danger. I never felt this way before. What does it mean?"

He sunk down and lay gazing toward the cot-

tage, from one window of which shone a dim light. His thoughts were busy and he did not heed the flight of time. Suddenly he caught his breath and sunk lower till he hugged the ground.

"Great Scott!"

Like a dark phantom a tall, shadowy form swiftly passed him, moving silently toward the cottage. Not a sound did the shadow seem to make, but its aspect, as it glided along, suggested a panther creeping upon its hoped-for prey. The breeze did not lift the brim of the slouched hat which the figure wore, but it tossed back the cape of the long cloak till it resembled the wings of a huge black bat.

"Hopping toads!" thought Frank. "Who or what was that? There's something crooked afoot!—another mystery. What won't develop, next, I wonder?"

He lifted himself and looked after the retreating shadow. The dark figure was making directly toward the house from which shone the faint light.

"I'm going to follow," decided the plucky farm-lad. "I am going to see the whole of this, no matter what comes!"

Noiselessly he followed in the tracks of the phantom, and as it approached the house it seemed to move forward with redoubled caution.

Finally the figure paused and seemed to peer in at the window from which shone the faint light. A moment it stood there, and then one arm was lifted.

The light from the window fell upon something that gleamed like silver or burnished steel.

The watching boy caught his breath, and then—

Crack!

There was a bright flash, and the report of a pistol rung out upon the night air!

CHAPTER XII.

THE BANK ROBBERY.

AN involuntary cry broke from Frank's lips as he saw the flash and heard the report of the pistol. He knew that the cloaked figure had fired through the window at some one within the cottage. But at whom?

The boy did not have much time for speculation, for as soon as the shot was fired the cloaked man ran swiftly away.

"Jingoes!" gasped the farm-lad; "he is coming right for me!"

Had he paused to think, Frank would have simply hugged the ground and allowed the man to pass; but, he was seized by a sudden panic, such as sometimes assails the bravest, and leaping to his feet, he fled into the darkness.

"That man is a murderer! He will kill me if he catches me and discovers that I saw him fire the shot!" were the thoughts which flashed through the boy's brain.

Fear seemed to lend him wings and he was in no danger of being overtaken. He did not stop running, however, until he was safely within Farmer Hobbs's shed. Then he fell panting on the floor.

For a long time the exhausted lad lay there slowly regaining his breath. His thoughts were busy all the time. He believed that he had seen a murder committed, but, who was the cloaked man who fired the shot and at whom had he fired? Frank believed that the shot had been fired at Leon Norman. And who should desire Leon's death?

Owen Durand!

With difficulty the Bound Boy suppressed a cry which might have aroused Mr. Hobbs or his wife. He believed that he had hit upon the truth. Now that he thought of it, the cloaked figure had seemed to resemble the tall form of the gambler.

"It was Durand!" gasped the boy. "He has a grudge against Mr. Norman and he has murdered him. What shall I do?"

The question was more easily asked than answered. What could he do? His first thought was to arouse the farmer and his wife and tell them everything; but when he remembered that Hobbs and Durand had been in close conversation only the day before, he hesitated.

"I know Joel Hobbs pretty well," thought Frank, "and I am quite sure that he is far from an honest man. He has been pretty thick with Owen Durand and may know more than I imagine. If I told him what I have seen, I would not be believed. He would give me fits for being out after going to bed. What shall I do?"

Frank was certainly in a far from pleasant situation. The more he thought of the matter the more puzzled he became.

"Perhaps Mr. Norman was not killed," thought the boy. "If he was not, it will be

better for me if I say nothing about what I have seen. I wish I knew."

For nearly an hour he lay there thinking and trying to decide which was the best course for him to pursue. He finally decided to say nothing of what he had seen until morning. When he had arrived at this decision, he crept into the house and carefully made his way up the back stairs to bed.

The farm-lad did not pass a very comfortable night after he retired. All night he tossed and twisted as he dreamed of dark bat-like shadows, pistol-shots and murder most foul. He was exceedingly glad when morning came.

Frank's first thought in the morning was to tell Mrs. Hobbs about what he had seen the night before, but once more Joel seemed very vigilant and the boy found no opportunity to carry out his design.

But Frank was unable to keep his secret long. When he found that he was not going to be able to tell Mrs. Hobbs, he resolved to tell the farmer himself.

"Perhaps I saw a murder," was the thought which continually harassed him. "If I did it would not be right for me to keep still. I must tell some one!"

When he had arrived at this conclusion, he lost no time in relating his story to the farmer, taking care, of course, not to tell why he was in the vicinity of Leon Norman's home at such a time. Joel seemed not only amazed but also frightened. His usually florid face actually grew pale.

"I—I—don't believe such a ridiculous story!" he stammered. "Some one attempted to murder young Norman! Bosh!—bosh, I say! How did you happen to be there at such a time to see all this?"

Frank had expected the question and was prepared with an answer—a truthful one.

"I was restless and could not sleep, so I arose and noiselessly left the house. When I was out of doors I walked in the direction of Mr. Norman's home. I did not know that there was any one in the vicinity till the shadow-like form passed me. I was frightened, but followed and saw what I have related."

"Bosh again! I don't believe a word of it! If I did, I'd thrash yew fer leavin' the house after I sent yew to bed; but as it is, I kinder guess yew was dreamin'. Yew never saw all this."

And try as he might, the farm-lad seemed unable to convince the farmer that he was telling the truth. Joel insisted that he had been dreaming, and finally grew so angry that he was forced to give up trying to convince him.

"I have done my duty," Frank muttered to himself. "If murder was done last night, my conscience will be clear. But I wonder what made Mr. Hobbs look so peculiar when I told him what I had seen."

At the same time Joel was saying to himself, while he watched his boy slave from beneath his shaggy eyebrows:

"What in the name of sin can that air boy have bin up rantin' roun' las' night for? It's lucky he didn't bear Duran' when he swore to kill that yo'nker, for if he had, he'd 'a' understood the hull matter an' that might 'a' brought me inter it in some way. I tell yew, this air killin's mighty bad bizness."

But the farmer and his bound boy had not been at work in the field more than two hours when they both saw Leon Norman ride past and continue on in the direction of Riverton. At the sight of the young farmer, alive and well, Joel Hobbs seemed scarcely less surprised than was the lad who had seen the would-be assassin shoot through the window the night before. As soon as he could recover his usual composure, Hobbs stalked over to where Frank was still standing gazing at Leon's retreating form. Catching the boy by the shoulder, he snarled:

"There, what did I tell ye! I knew he was all right! A pritty yarn yew tole! But I wasn't fool enough tew believe it. If I really thought that yew never dreamed it nor northin', an' was just lyin' to hear yerself talk, I'd—"

He lifted his hand as if to strike the lad, but paused, transfixed by a glance. There was something in Frank's piercing eyes which cowed Joel Hobbs and made him feel almost afraid of the boy.

"Wal, it's all right this time," he mumbled—"it's all right this time, but look out for the next!"

It was near noon when Owen Durand rode along beside the field where the farmer and his bound boy were at work, stopped his horse and called:

"Ho, Hobbs! come here; I want to see you." The farmer at once left his work and obeyed

the summons. Durand dismounted and soon the two men were in close conversation.

"Wonder what they are talking about," speculated Frank. "It will be a miracle if Mr. Hobbs does not tell Owen Durand the story that I told him. By Jinks! I'm more than half-inclined to believe that Mr. Hobbs knew more about that affair of last night than he wished to have me know! Perhaps Durand told him his plans."

And Frank had come nearer the truth than he knew.

Covertly the Bound Boy watched the two men while he worked. He was a little afraid of the gambler, and thought that if Hobbs told what he had seen the night before, Durand might be angered so greatly that he would do something desperate. But Frank was unable to decide whether the farmer told Durand or not. Frank fancied that both men acted in a singular manner, seeming very much afraid of being overheard.

"More plotting," was the boy's comment, and he was right.

When Mrs. Hobbs blew the dinner-horn, both men seemed too busy to notice it. Frank thought that his opportunity to have a talk with the farmer's wife had come. Without a word, he started for the house; but he had not gone far before he heard Hobbs gruffly calling to him.

"Hold on, there!" shouted the farmer; "you jest wait till I git reddey tew go tew dinner. You can keep ter work, tew."

And Frank was obliged to obey.

As for Hobbs, he made no move to go to his dinner till the horn had sounded for the third time. Then he and the gambler separated, both acting a trifle shy and nervous, so Frank thought.

"I'll bet they have laid another plan to finish Leon Norman!" suddenly flashed through the boy's brain. "I must try to warn him some way."

But the farm-lad did not know how closely he was to be watched by Farmer Hobbs. He was given no opportunity to see Leon that day or night, nor did he have a chance to speak with the farmer's wife. That night Hobbs followed him to his room and locked him in.

"I guess that'll keep him quiet tew-night," chuckled Joel, as he returned down the stairs.

It did. Frank spent another wretched night, for his mind was filled with strange thoughts and fearful forebodings.

The farm-lad was glad when the morning light stole in at his window, and he waited impatiently till he heard Farmer Hobbs's heavy tread as he ascended the stairs to unlock the door. He descended the stairs close at the farmer's heels.

"Yew can milk the keows an' tarn 'em inter paster," instructed the farmer, without looking at his bound boy. "Then we'll have breakfast. Arter breakfast yew can put the Paris green onter the 'taters in ther south patch. I sha'n't be here this forenoon."

"Where are you going, Joel?" Mrs. Hobbs ventured to ask.

"That hain't none of your 'tarnal business!" snarled the ill-tempered old curmudgeon.

After breakfast Joel harnessed the old white horse and rode away toward Riverton. It was high noon when he returned, and Frank had come in from the field for his dinner. The boy was telling Mrs. Hobbs of the singular things which he had seen, when the white horse came galloping wildly into the dooryard, drawing the rattling wagon in which sat the farmer. A moment later Hobbs came bursting into the house.

"Betsey," he shouted, "I'm erfeared we're ruined!"

"Why, Joel!" exclaimed the startled woman; "what can you mean?"

"I mean that the Riverton Bank has bin robbed, an' every cent of reddey munny I had in the worl' was in that bank!"

"Land of mercy!" gasped Mrs. Hobbs.

"When did this happen?"

"Las' night," was the reply.

"Gracious!" flashed through Frank's brain. "Now I understand it all. This is what that letter was about. I have been too slow to prevent the robbery, but perhaps I can be of some service in finding the ones who did the job."

CHAPTER XIII.

FRANK AND THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

"Yes, I'm erfeared we're ruined," repeated Mr. Hobbs, as he flopped down into a chair.

"How much was stolen?" asked his wife.

"I dunno," groaned Joel; "there don't nobody know. The bank's closed an' they've got a detective there lookin' round. I dunno what

they are goin' tew do 'bout it. Nobody seems able tew find out."

"Perhaps they have not lost much."

"P'raps they hain't, hey! Wal, I'll bet they have. Some say that they have lost as much as twenty thousand dollars; some say 'tain't more'n five or ten. But I'll bet the biggest figger comes the highest—I will, by gosh!"

"Land sakes!" gasped Mrs. Hobbs; "twenty thousand dollars!"

"So y're jest gittin' woke up ter realize that we have prob'ly lost somethin', are ye?" sneered the farmer. "If the bank was robbed of twenty thousan' an' the depositors make a run on it, she'll prob'ly bust."

Mrs. Hobbs sunk into a chair, fanning herself excitedly with her apron. Joel seemed to watch her with a gleam of triumph in his beady eyes. For some reason it appeared to Frank that the farmer was secretly delighted at his wife's consternation; in fact, that Joel was more delighted than he was concerned about the robbery.

"There's something about this that I do not understand," thought the farm-lad.

"Well, Joel," faltered Mrs. Hobbs, "what are we going to do?"

"Do!" mocked the farmer—"what do yew s'pose I'm goin' tew do? I'm goin' back tew town an' find out if there's enny show for my munny. I'm goin' tew have it if I can git it! Is dinner reddey?"

"Yes, yes; almost. I'll have it in a minute."

"Wal, stir yerself, for I want tew be gittin' back tew town. Don't go tew sleep about it!"

It is needless to say that Mrs. Hobbs stirred herself. She got things ready in short order. Joel sent Frank to look after the horse, and when the boy returned, he found the farmer already at the table.

The mid-day meal was soon dispatched, and grabbing his hat, Joel at once left the house. Thus Frank was given another opportunity to tell Mrs. Hobbs what he had intended; but for some reason, the farm-lad did not do so. He seemed to have changed his mind about telling her; and the woman's mind was too greatly occupied with thoughts of the bank robbery for her to recall him to the story which had been broken by the sudden appearance of Mr. Hobbs.

When Frank finally left the house he met Joel, who told him to harness the horse at once. The boy knew that the poor animal had not been given sufficient time to eat, but he dared not say so; therefore he proceeded to obey orders.

By the time that the horse was harnessed Hobbs was ready. As he climbed into the old wagon, he said:

"I hain't had no time tew plan out enny work for yew, boy; so I dunno jest what tew set ye at. Yew can finish up the 'taters, an' if I hain't back then, yew can rest. By gum! there can't nobody say that yew don't have an easy time of it! Git up!" and once more he gave the horse a vigorous cut and was whirled out of the yard at an amazing speed.

For several moments Frank was dumb with surprise. Finally he muttered:

"Well, this beats the Dutch! This is the second time that he has gone off that way. What can have come over Mr. Hobbs? Why, usually, if he had nothing else for me to do, he would set me piling over wood or something of that sort. I don't know what to think. It won't take me over an hour at the most to finish the potatoes." And in an hour's time that task was finished.

"Now," said the boy to himself, "what next? Ah, I have it! I have resolved to turn detective and hunt down the robbers of Riverton Bank. Now is my time to get in some work. It would be a surprise to some folks if I did cause the capture of the rascals. I believe that I have a clew, as the real detectives call it; and my clew is that letter, only a part of which I read."

"But come to think of it, I don't know as that is a clew, for it is not now in my possession. Perhaps it should be called a pointer. Any way, I am going to work it for what it is worth. I was tempted to tell Mr. Hobbs about it, but, something kept me from doing so. He might have said that I was dreaming, as he did when I told him of the man who fired in at the window of Leon Norman's home. I am glad I said nothing about it."

"But now I am going to visit the hollow tree again, for I may find something there that will aid me in bringing the criminals to justice. Something seems to tell me that I shall be instrumental in their discovery and arrest. Ah—ah! here I am, Frank Frisk, amateur detective, just taking hold of my first case. May good fortune aid me."

A short time later found Frank at the hollow tree in the midst of the pasture woods. His hand was soon within the place where the secret letters had been deposited, but a look of disappointment clouded his face as he withdrew it quite empty.

"Not a letter," he exclaimed in a tone filled with vexation. "I hoped to find one."

The boy sat down at the foot of the tree and for a long time was lost in a reverie. All manner of plans and schemes passed through his head, none of which, however, seemed at all practicable. He was finally obliged to acknowledge to himself that he did not know how to begin his detective work.

"I don't know just what to do," he muttered, as he arose slowly to his feet.

He walked back along the cow-path, his head bowed. He saw no one till he heard a strange voice say:

"Good-afternoon, my son!"

And then, looking up, he found that he was face to face with the strange white-faced man whom he had seen once before. The unknown was regarding the boy with a pair of eyes which seemed to gleam with an unnatural fire. Frank started back in alarm.

"Do not be afraid, my boy," begged the old man—for he appeared old. "I will not harm you in the least, and I wish to speak with you."

"Who are you?" asked Frank.

A strange, awe-inspiring smile swept over the man's pallid face.

"Who am I?" he echoed. "I am one who has escaped from the regions below! I feel like a fiend incarnate! Within my breast is a perfect hell of passion. I have suffered the tortures of the damned, and now I live for vengeance—vengeance!"

His words and his manner were so terrifying that the lad was tempted to turn and flee. The stranger seemed to read his very thoughts, for he said quickly and with forced calmness:

"No, I am not mad. Do not fly from me, for I wish to look upon your face a little longer—I wish to hear you talk. You may think this strange, but some time you will understand. No, no! I am not mad, but it is a miracle that I have my right mind!"

Frank knew not what to say, so he stood regarding the man in silence. The stranger scanned his face with an eagerness that could not be concealed.

"Ah! you are an honest-looking boy," he declared. "You are a boy for a father to be proud of—to be proud of! I like to look upon your face; it is good. I have heard that your name is Frank Frisk."

"It is, sir."

"Ah, yes! you look like her—you have her eyes! Your face is molded like hers; your lips have that same proud curve. You are so much like her—so much!"

The boy's amazement held him dumb. Of whom was this wild, white-faced man speaking?

"And she is dead!" the stranger continued—"dead! I have been to her grave—I have stood beside it—I have flung myself across it. Darkness and daylight—the evening dew and the morning sun—they have found me there! But nothing can bring her back to me; she is gone forever—forever!"

There was a look of sadness on the stranger's pallid face that the Bound Boy never forgot. Indeed, the man seemed on the point of bursting into tears, but, with a sudden outward fling of his hands, he appeared to throw off this sudden sadness. Whirling half-around, he glanced back along the path, saying:

"We must not stand here too long, for I expect that he will visit this wood this afternoon—the dastardly double traitor! His day is coming—it is coming! Ha! ha! my boy, it is coming!"

"Whom do you mean?" asked Frank, almost involuntarily.

"I mean your enemy and mine—the dastardly creature whose vile plotting has caused so much misery! Ah, but he shall feel my grip—he shall feel it!"

A sudden change seemed to come over the mysterious man. He spoke again, calmly:

"I have said more than I intended," he declared. "I wish you would forget it. Perhaps we had better separate before I continue my foolish talk. Will you take my hand?"

Frank did not hesitate to do so, but it seemed that he touched a piece of ice. He was unable to repress a shudder.

"Ah, it is cold I know," said the stranger, "it is cold, but within my bosom is a heart that is filled with fire. But I am talking again. Good-by for the present."

And without another word they separated.

CHAPTER XIV.

DELLA HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

"My dear Della," said Mrs. Thaddeus Sheldon, casting a look over her shoulder as she stood before the glass, carefully inspecting her appearance as revealed by the reflection—"my dear child, you must listen to reason."

"I am ready to listen to reason, mother," was the calm reply, as Della continued to view the landscape from the window; "but what you see fit to designate as reason, I consider folly indeed."

Mrs. Sheldon turned square round with her back fairly to the glass—a very unusual thing for her to do while able to see her image in a mirror—and after gazing steadily at her daughter for a moment, said with some warmth:

"You must remember that I have lived in this world a little longer than you have, and therefore am better able to judge what is sensible and what is folly. Owen Durand is a catch which any girl might be proud of."

"Well, I am a very unambitious angler, mother," laughed the girl. "I have no desire to land such a big fish."

"Della!" sternly, "this is a serious matter. I wish you to drop jesting."

"Very well, mother mine, I have dropped it. I will be as serious as you wish; but let me tell you now that it is useless to talk to me of Owen Durand. I heartily detest the man!"

"A foolish feeling which you must try to overcome."

"Must, mother? Must is a hard word. I have too much of my father's blood in my veins to be forced into such a detestable union. Oh, mother, mother! you must not think me hard and un-dutiful; but I cannot marry that man—I cannot!"

Mrs. Sheldon turned hastily around and again faced the glass. Della's manner had suddenly touched her. As long as the girl was defiant she could argue with her; but the moment that Della appealed to her feelings, she was touched.

"Mother," said the girl, softly, as she came from the window and placed her arm about her mother's waist, "I want you to answer one question for me: Do you really want me to marry Owen Durand?"

The suddenness of this question seemed to fluster Mrs. Sheldon, and for several moments she was unable to say a word in reply. When she did speak she did so in a faltering manner.

"Do I really want you to marry Owen Durand? Why—why, what a question! Della, my child, how can you ask after all that has passed between us?"

"You have not answered my question, mother."

These quiet words completed the woman's discomfiture. She turned from the glass with an impatient gesture, saying sharply:

"It is not your place to question me, child. I do not care to answer such a silly question."

"I did not think you would," declared Della, calmly. "To tell the truth, I could not believe that within your heart you really wished me to marry Owen Durand. There is something about this affair that I do not understand. Never before have both you and father seemed so determined to compel me to do something against which my very soul rebelled."

"My dear Della," said Mrs. Sheldon, turning to lay both hands on the girl's shoulders, "you should not question our motive in this matter, for you must know that we are working for your best interests. I wish I could make you realize the truth—could make you understand that this marriage will avert an awful calamity. I wish I could cause you to understand this without having to tell you everything."

Della was amazed. She stared at her mother in silence for several moments; then she cried:

"Why, what can you mean? You speak in riddles, mother!"

"There—I have said too much! I feared that I should. You must not question me."

Then the judge's wife walked nervously across the room to the window where Della had been standing and gazed out with vacant, unseeing eyes. The girl watched her closely, feeling almost terrified at her mother's unusual actions. Finally she followed her across the room and paused close beside her without speaking. For several moments the woman did not stir. At last she turned slowly.

"I know what you would ask," she said. "You would urge me to explain my words. I cannot! But I fear that the time is at hand when you must know the truth. I shall not tell you. That shall be the duty of the one who unwisely involved us all in this net from which there is but one escape."

The girl's amazement did not diminish in the

least, for she had seen her mother display emotions of which she had never dreamed her capable. What was this awful secret, the existence of which she had so suddenly become aware?

"Mother!"

Mrs. Sheldon turned swiftly from the window, one hand half uplifted.

"Hush! It is useless to urge me. I can give you one reason why I wish to see this marriage take place. It is because I wish to see you safely united to a man who has sufficient wealth to support you handsomely should anything ever happen to sweep away what your father possesses."

"But there can be no danger of such an event taking place."

"Ah, you know little of the danger. Such a thing is liable to happen. Even now we may be tottering on the brink of ruin."

"But, mother, I care nothing for wealth if it does not bring me happiness. I could never be happy with Owen Durand if he had the wealth of a Croesus!"

"Ah, my child, you are yet young—you are yet young! Why, Della, you do not know what poverty is! You do not know what it is to want a thing and not have it. Anything is preferable to poverty. I know what it is to want and want in vain. I know what it is to wear calico while rich ladies rode past me in silks. I was a poor girl and I know the horrors of want—the misery of poverty. My dear girl, anything is preferable to poverty!"

"You may think so, mother, but I do not. With one—"

"There, there! We will not discuss this matter any more at present. Thaddeus has just returned from Riverton; the carriage is at the door. I will go down and see him, for he may have some mail for me."

And without another word, the worldly woman left the room and descended the stairs. Five minutes later she returned, her face being quite colorless and her voice trembling a little as she said:

"Della, your father wishes to see you in the library."

A finger of ice seemed to suddenly touch the girl's heart, but she arose without a word and descended the stairs. Judge Sheldon was nervously pacing the library floor, and he seemed not to notice her entrance till she stood before him and said:

"You sent for me, father."

"Yes, yes," he repeated, stopping suddenly in his walk. "I sent for you, for I have a most important matter to speak of."

And then, as if anxious to come to the point at once, he demanded:

"When will you be ready to marry Owen Durand?"

"Never!"

"Ah!—never! But I think you will—you must! Last night the Riverton Bank was robbed, and I expect I have lost something there if the truth is told concerning the sum obtained by the parties who did the job. If a run is made on the bank it may have a hard pull—may even have to suspend payment."

"I am very sorry, I am sure; but, father, I cannot see what this has to do with my marrying Owen Durand."

"My dear, you do not understand the exact position in which I am placed. Mr. Durand requires the payment of a certain debt. It must be paid at once. If Durand presses the matter, I am ruined, for I cannot make the payment."

"And still I am puzzled to understand it all. I am amazed to know that you owe Owen Durand anything. How can that be?"

"Do not ask me questions. I owe Durand the money, and it must be paid."

"But if I marry him the debt will still remain unpaid."

"If you marry him he has promised to make you a wedding present of the notes which he holds against me."

"Ah!" scornfully. "And so I am as good as legal tender! I am to be sold to this man—this wretch!—whom I so heartily detest!—sold to him like an animal! And pray, how many thousand am I worth?"

He retreated a step before her flashing eyes, a flush of shame coloring his face. Then he bowed his head on his breast, a smothered groan breaking from his lips.

"Father!" she cried, starting toward him—"father, forgive me! I spoke too quick. I did not mean what I said."

"And yet it is the truth," came bitterly from his lips. "I did not mean to let you know it when I asked your mother to send you here, but it came out in spite of me. There is no use in

wearing a mask any longer. The plain and simple truth is that Owen Durand holds notes against me which must be paid in some way. I have not the money to meet them. If he forces payment, I am ruined. The robbery of the Riverton Bank will make little difference; I brought that up as an excuse when I did not wish to tell you the whole truth. Durand has seen me to-day, and he swears that if the notes are not paid or you do not at once consent to become his wife, he shall crowd me to the wall. Ah, God! that I should ever come to this!"

He buried his face in his hands and his body shook with an emotion that it was difficult for him to suppress. Della was at his side in a moment.

"Father," she said softly—"dear father, do not take this so to heart. I will see Mr. Durand—I will plead with him! He shall give you more time. He is hard I know; but I will go down on my knees before him and entreat him to be merciful. Surely he cannot refuse!"

He lifted his haggard face.

"My dear child," he said slowly, "you do not know Owen Durand. He has a heart of stone—a heart of stone!"

"But, father, I can try—it will do no harm—I can try! Perhaps I can touch his heart. Let me try."

"Well, my dear, darling daughter, it shall be as you wish. You may try, but you will fail. There is but one way to save me, that is to give yourself up as a sacrifice. Durand will provide you with a good home, and he will not misuse you. He will call at one. You have until then to think of it."

"Now I wish you would leave me alone for a time."

Della kissed him and then went slowly from the room.

Owen Durand was on hand promptly at one o'clock. Descending the stairs, Della heard him talking with her father in the library. She caught Leon Norman's name and paused breathless with suspense and interest.

"Arrested?" she heard her father say—"Leon Norman arrested? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. He has surely been arrested, and the case looks black against him. It is my opinion that he will be proven guilty."

Then Della burst into the room.

"Leon arrested?" she cried. "For what?"

Durand looked startled, but he had sufficient presence of mind to bow politely—triumphantly, she fancied—as he replied:

"Yes, Miss Sheldon, Mr. Norman has been arrested on a very serious charge."

"What charge?—of what is he accused?"

"Of being one of the robbers of the Riverton Bank," was the even reply.

She staggered back with both hands clasped over her heart. Both men thought she was about to fall and they sprang to catch her; but she recovered herself and waved them off. Fixing her eyes on Owen Durand with a look that he never forgot, she cried:

"Something tells me that this is your work, you villain; I see it in your face! Your vile plots are working well just now; but the hour of disaster is coming! Hear me, for I feel that I speak the truth. Leon Norman shall walk forth a free man, and you—you, the schemer!—you, the vile plotter!—you shall take his place and suffer for the crime which you would hurl upon an innocent man! You, Owen Durand, are the guilty wretch who shall meet a just punishment!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOUND BOY AS A SHADOW.

FRANK FRISK watched the strange, white-faced man as he walked away down the path.

"He seems almost like a crazy man," muttered the boy. "Yet there was a hidden meaning to all his wild talk. And, after all, his talk was not so wild. He has an enemy, one who has done him a great wrong. I fancy I begin to understand the meaning of the contents of the strange secret letters. He is the person spoken of in them, the one who had escaped. That is it!"

Frank was confident that he had hit upon the truth, and the more he thought of it the more confident he became. The farm-lad realized that he was slowly learning something of a great crime, the magnitude of which he was unable to estimate at that time, but which made him shudder whenever he thought of it.

"Here's enough detective work to keep a fellow busy," Frank muttered again. "It seems to me that I am not doing much of anything for all of the pointers which I have got. My confidence in my detective ability is slowly fading away. But then, what can a fellow do,

handicapped as I am? Simply nothing. But then, I am going to keep an eye out all the same and see what comes of it. That strange man said that he expected his enemy would visit this wood this afternoon. If he does, that will be my chance to see him and so get at the lay of the land. I rather guess I'll lay around this patch of brush this afternoon. If Mr. Hobbs gets back and finds me gone, there will be trouble; but then, I must take my chances."

The remainder of the afternoon until supper-time the boy spent in the woods. It was near three o'clock when he espied a familiar form walking swiftly along one of the paths which ran through the wood.

"Ho-ho!" gasped the Bound Boy; "that's Owen Durand! Wonder what he is here for? I'll bet a cow that he is connected with this strange affair in some way! Gracious! I am beginning to see more light. Shouldn't be surprised if I tumbled right onto the rock bottom facts pretty soon. I am going to follow Durand and see what comes of it."

Cautiously the boy stole along after the gambler. Frank had need to be cautious, for every now and then Durand would pause and glance searchingly around.

"He acts as if he is afraid of being seen here," thought the young shadower. "I know well enough that he is not here for any good purpose. I'll do my level best to discover what he is up to."

Finally Durand paused and gave a low, cautious whistle. Then he listened closely, but seemed to hear nothing, for he repeated the whistle somewhat louder than before. That time the listening farm-lad distinctly heard an answer at a little distance. Durand gave utterance to a soft exclamation of satisfaction and then went slowly forward.

"Great Scott!" was Frank's mental exclamation; "he is going straight toward the jungle!"

"The jungle" was a small part in the very center of that piece of wood which well deserved its name. It was one tangled mass of vines, bushes, and fallen and twisted trees. Frank had often thought that it would afford a secure hiding-place.

Straight toward the jungle Durand made his way, and at a safe distance Frank followed. The boy shadower now used still greater caution, for he knew that there were others—friends of Durand—within that very piece of wood.

Just before he reached the jungle the tall gambler paused and whistled again, soft and low. The signal was instantly answered in a similar manner from amid the tangled mass just ahead. Then Owen went forward, and, falling on his hands and knees, parted the tangled vines and crept out of the watching boy's sight.

"He's gone," murmured Frank—"gone to meet some one who is hidden within the depths of the jungle. I would give considerable if I could get near enough to hear their talk. By Jinks! I must get near enough in some way!"

From that moment he devoted every thought and act to the accomplishment of that design. For nearly half an hour he worked; at the end of that time he was delighted to find himself in a position where he could overhear what was being said by the men within the jungle, although he could not see their faces. Durand was speaking.

"Yes, I am positive that I saw his face at my window," declared the gambler, with apparent excitement. "He is here, laying low and waiting for his time to strike."

"You may be right," admitted a gruff voice, which the listener instantly recognized as belonging to the evil-faced man whom he had seen at the hollow tree. "If he is here, I have seen nothing of him."

"Have you watched sharp?" questioned Durand.

"Watched is it? Well, I should say so! Two thousand for a live man or four for a dead one is quite an inducement to watch."

"And you have not seen a trace of him, you say?"

"Nary."

"Well, he is here just the same, and I saw his face at the window. I am beginning to get a little shaky, for something seems to tell me that ruin is impending."

"Ye're losin' yer nerve, ole man," a third voice declared.

"Hello!" was Frank's scarcely suppressed exclamation; "there is some one there that I don't know nothing about. A new character has appeared on the scene."

"I don't know but I am," the gambler admitted. "But you can both see that I am treading on dangerous ground. From this time on I

cannot expect the aid of either of you, for you will not dare remain in this vicinity. I must fight the battle alone. I should not have planned this other job and got you into it if I had not stood in desperate need of money, for I knew all the time that you would have to skip as soon as possible after the work was done. That leaves me alone to meet the one who naturally hates me after a most deadly fashion. If I remain, I shall have a desperate fight of it I feel sure."

"I'd stay and fight it out," declared the gruff voice. "If you run, you may be suspected of having a hand in this other job."

"You are right. I am in a decidedly unpleasant position. I do not want to run, for I have certain matters planned which I wish to carry out—matters which, if successful, will once more place me on solid ground."

"Well, I don't see but you have the winning hand," the gruff voice said. "Situated as you are, you should be able to beat your—your enemy if he appears."

"Perhaps so—perhaps not."

"But he cannot prove his identity. He has been dead to the world for sixteen years."

"But he is not going to come out and give me a chance in that way. He will strike when I am not expecting it, and I fear he will have me off my feet before I get a chance to strike back."

"Durand, you are afraid of him."

"I acknowledge the corn."

"Well, I don't know what you are going to do. We will have to leave you at the earliest moment. And until we can do so, we must lay low."

"Just so. While they are on the watch for suspicious-appearing parties for miles around, you will be safely concealed close to Riverton. To-night we will divide the booty. Don't forget; be on hand at ten. You shall have a hiding-place that no one will ever suspect."

"I must be going now. Lay low till it is pitch dark; but be on hand at ten."

"Bet your life we'll be there. I don't care about sleeping in this place another night if I can get under cover."

"Ner me," asserted the unfamiliar voice.

"You shall have a bed on an attic floor," assured Durand.

And then he crept forth from the jungle, passing within ten feet of the boy shadower.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN FARMER HOBBS'S ATTIC.

WHEN the little amateur detective came up from the pasture he discovered that Farmer Hobbs had returned from Riverton and was standing in the tie-up door, talking in low tones with Durand.

The boy succeeded in reaching the house without being seen by the two men. He knew not what course to pursue. He felt sure that he had discovered the robbers of the Riverton Bank, but he knew from experience that it would be useless to tell Joel Hobbs what he had seen and heard. He had pondered seriously on the matter and could see but one course to pursue. When both the farmer and his wife were asleep that night he would arise and go to Leon Norman with his story. He felt sure that Leon would know what to do. He did not know that the young farmer had been arrested as one of the robbers.

"If Mr. Hobbs locks me into the room, I'll find a way to get out of the window," Frank told himself. "Nothing shall keep me there to-night."

At the supper-table Frank learned of Leon Norman's arrest. This filled him with dismay and doubt. What was he to do? For a time he was at a loss to decide, but he finally concluded that the best thing he could do would be to tell his story to Judge Sheldon.

"He is an awful stern-looking man," thought the boy; "but I calculate he is in for the right every time. Perhaps he will believe my story. If he does, he will know what to do. I am sure that Mr. Norman is innocent, and if these men can be captured it will show that he is not the one who did the job. Frank Frisk, you have some work before you."

That night Farmer Hobbs sent his bound boy off to bed at an early hour, and much to Frank's delight, he did not follow and lock the door. But the farmer did not retire as soon as Frank had hoped that he would. Indeed, Joel seemed unusually wide-awake and restless, for Frank could hear him nervously walking the floor of the kitchen.

"Wonder what's the matter with him," speculated the boy. "I wish he would go off to bed and give a fellow a chance. I can't get out of the house without being caught by him."

It was least 9:30 before the farmer extinguished the light in the kitchen. Frank listened closely, but could not determine if the farmer went to bed at once.

"He may be laying for me," said the boy to himself. "If I knew he was I'd try the window. I'm going to tell somebody what I know or make a bad slip-up."

For nearly half an hour he listened at the head of the stairs; then he went back into his room and looked out of the window. The night was very dark, but as he looked forth, he saw two dark forms skulk out of the gloom and pause at the side of the house almost directly beneath his window. In a moment he thought of the two burglars whom he had once seen beneath that very window.

"Jingoes!" was his mental exclamation. "I'll bet them are the same fellows! What are they after? I guess I'd better wake Mr. Hobbs and let him look out for himself this time."

He heard the two men speaking in whispers, but could not understand their words. Finally they crept round the corner of the house.

"Now for Mr. Hobbs," muttered Frank.

Then he left the room and made his way noiselessly to the head of the stairs. Then he paused, for he thought he heard a light, cat-like step in the hall below. For fully a minute he remained there listening; then to his amazement he heard a low, peculiar rap on the door. Then some one in the hall turned the key which had been left in the door-lock, the door swung open and two dark forms glided in like shadows.

"Great Jinks!" flashed through the brain of the lad at the head of the stairs; "burglars have got into the house ahead of me, and I shall not be able to alarm Mr. Hobbs. They had an accomplice concealed in the house and he has admitted his companions. What am I going to do?"

This seemed a poser.

"I will find some way to warn Mr. Hobbs and defeat those fellows," was the boy's mental assertion.

Again he listened and was rewarded by hearing a voice say:

"Hang it! it's dark as a pocket in here."

Frank gave a start of surprise. He knew the voice. It was the gruff base of the evil-faced man whom he had seen in the pasture wood near the hollow tree! Who then should the man's companion naturally be? The boy instantly thought of the stranger whom he heard speak in the depths of the jungle that afternoon.

"Yes, 'tis kinder dark I'll admit, but ye see I didn't dare tew keep a light goin'."

Frank came near uttering a cry of amazement, for he recognized the voice of the last speaker.

It was Farmer Hobbs!

"Great Gideon!" gasped the boy, as he leaned forward and tried to peer down into the darkness. "That was Mr. Hobbs or I don't know potatoes from pumpkins! What does this mean?"

"Well," said the gruff voice, "here we are. What are you going to do with us?"

"I have things all fixed for ye up in the attic," Joel replied. "I'll take ye up there, but ye'd better take off yer shews so's not tew wake the boy. That's right; now foller me an' step light."

"They are coming!" thought Frank, and like a shadow he stole swiftly back to his room.

By keeping his door slightly ajar he was able to tell when the men passed and ascended the attic stairs. Then once more he crept out and listened. It is impossible to describe Frank's amazement. He could scarcely believe that he was not dreaming, but a good hard pinch convinced him that he was very much awake.

"The Old Boy has broke loose," was his mental decision. "Mr. Hobbs has taken to biding criminals. Now I understand what I heard this afternoon about sleeping on the attic floor. Those men are to hide here till the excitement about the bank robbery has abated. But I can't understand it, for Mr. Hobbs seemed awfully excited and indignant about the robbery. He acted as if he had lost his whole fortune by it. But it looks now as if he was playing some kind of a game. Perhaps he did not have so much in the Riverton Bank as he pretended; or possibly he believes this robbery will not swamp the bank and he will still be able to draw his money when he wants it."

But the amateur did not know at that time how near the truth he had come.

He heard the three men pass over some loose boards in the attic, and then his ears caught a sound which told him that a distant door had opened and closed.

"He has taken them into that little old room at the very furthest end of the house," was the boy's conclusion. "A very good place for them to hide, for Farmer Joel Hobbs will never be suspected of harboring criminals. But, if I know my head from a cabbage, something will happen before morning."

Pretty soon the boy heard returning footsteps, and concluding that the farmer was coming, once more hastened to his room, closing the door fully. Then he listened. A few moments later he heard the soft footsteps pause near the door. Frank feared that the farmer would enter the room, but Joel did nothing of the kind. After listening a few moments, and evidently satisfying himself that the lad had not been aroused, he passed on down the stairs.

"There will be an explosion in this house before another day," muttered the boy. "If Joel Hobbs will conceal criminals, he must take the consequences when caught. My only regret is that it will bring trouble to Mrs. Hobbs."

Softly he opened the door a trifle and listened. He had scarcely done so when he again heard a peculiar knock upon the hall door.

"Gracious!" thought Frank. "Another is coming. It's Durand this time I'll bet!" and, sure enough, in a few moments Farmer Hobbs ascended the stairs with Owen Durand close behind him! At the head of the stairs they paused for a moment, and the gambler said in a whisper:

"You are sure that the cursed boy is fast asleep? He must know nothing of this."

"He's sleeping like a log," was Hobbs's assurance.

"Then the average log must be a mighty light sleeper," thought the young amateur, who had his ear close to the key-hole.

"That is good," came from Durand. "But you feel sure that your wife will not come up and take a peep at us?"

"If she does, I'll wring her gosh-blamed neck!" growled the farmer.

Following this something was said which the boy at the keyhole could not understand, and then the two men went on up the attic stairs.

As soon as he thought it safe to do so, Frank crept out of his room, carefully closing the door behind him.

"I'm not going back there to-night," he declared. "But what is it best to do first? Had I better leave the house at once and hurry to Judge Sheldon? I don't know. By gracious! I will creep up into the attic and make sure that there is no mistake; I will be certain that the men which Mr. Hobbs let in are the ones whom I heard talking in the jungle to-day."

And nothing warned him of the unlucky event which was to follow.

Noiselessly he crept up the stairs. At the top he halted, and gazed toward the end of the house where the little attic room was located. From several cracks and holes streams of light shone out into the old open attic, telling him for a certainty that the ones he sought were in the little room.

"By gracious!" thought the dauntless lad; "if I can creep over there without making a noise, I can peep into that room through one of those holes. I'll try it!"

It was a hazardous thing to attempt, for there was really no attic floor. A few loose boards were laid on the cross-beams, and those were warped so that it was the next thing to an impossibility to pass over them without making a noise. But Frank had determined to make the attempt.

Slowly the boy crept along the loose boards toward the little room. It was a tedious task, and several times he made a slight noise. Each time he paused and listened, with his heart beating wildly. He had decided if he made a noise to alarm the men to make a break and get out of the house in some way. But they did not appear to hear the slight noises which he made. As he crept forward the farm-lad could plainly hear the low hum of voices coming from the little room.

"I'm bound to get there somehow," he affirmed to himself, and get there he did after a time. Carefully he arose to his feet, intent on peering through a knot-hole from which streamed a bar of light. But, careful as he was, he made a misdeal. His foot slipped from the board on which he was standing, just as his eye reached the level of the knot-hole. The foot struck upon the lathing, but that was not sufficient to hold his weight. With a sudden crash it gave way, allowing Frank's leg to pass through nearly to the thigh.

Three startled exclamations, uttered in unison, came from the little room close at hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

LEON NORMAN'S VISITOR.

It was true that Leon Norman had been arrested on the charge of being one of the robbers of the Riverton Bank. A telegram had summoned a detective from the nearest city, the officer arriving in Riverton at 10:23 in the forenoon and proceeding at once to the bank. He was a young man who had just got onto the force, and he believed himself a hustler. He allowed no grass to grow under his feet, metaphorically speaking, and at exactly ten minutes past twelve, less than two hours after arriving in town, he arrested Leon Norman.

Of course every one was surprised—or nearly every one. The most of the people of Riverton had believed Leon to be an upright and honorable young man, and some of them could scarcely credit the report that he had been arrested. There were a few of the "I-told-you-so" kind of people who declared that they had always suspected that the young man was a sly one; they had always said that he would come out in his true colors some time. These people seemed to take a great delight in telling their less acute neighbors of their wonderful foresight. But there were also many who would not believe Leon guilty, although the evidence against him was said to be sufficient to convict the best man in Riverton.

Just what the evidence against the young farmer was the public did not know. It was whispered that Leon's handkerchief had been found within the bank building not twenty feet from the plundered safe which stood within the useless vault; but no one could be found who knew whether this was true or not. Some said that a portion of the stolen money had been found concealed in the Widow Norman's cottage, but this could not be substantiated.

When the report of the robbery was circulated through the country, people came pouring into Riverton till it seemed as if there was a circus in town or a general holiday was being observed. They gathered on the corners and talked in a way which poorly concealed their excitement, every man feeling it his duty to tell everybody else how and when he first heard of the startling event. Everybody had an opinion to express and no two could exactly agree.

Oh, it was a great day for Riverton!

The reader can imagine what a shock her son's arrest was to Leon's mother. The poor woman was completely prostrated, and but for the care of some kind-hearted neighbors, she might have died, for she went from one fainting-spell into another, and some of them seemed very much like death. But watchful eyes were near and kind hands cared for her.

His arrest seemed to daze the young farmer for a time. He could not say a word in his own defense, which was fortunate, for in his excitement he might have spoken words which could have been construed to mean something very different from what he intended. When he awoke to fully realize his position, he found himself in the village lock-up, which was situated beneath the Town Hall.

It is needless to tell how the long hours dragged away after he was placed in the lock-up. Several of his friends came to see him and assured him that everything possible should be done for him. They were sure that if he was held over till the next term of court, there would be no trouble at all in procuring bail, and thus he would be given plenty of time to collect his evidence to prove his innocence. In various ways they did their best to cheer him, but succeeded very poorly it must be confessed.

Near the middle of the afternoon a stranger came to see him. This stranger was a small man dressed in black clothes; in fact, he was the very one with whom Frank Frisk had talked in Farmer Hobbs's pasture after seeing the strange white-faced man for the first time. On entering the apartment where the young farmer was confined, the small man grasped Leon's hand saying warmly:

"Young man, I am glad to meet you but sorry to see you in such a bad scrape. I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I do not think you guilty; in truth, I am quite positive that you are innocent."

Leon gazed at the stranger suspiciously. He did not know the man and his first thought was that the stranger had come there to try to entrap him into a confession. The man in black seemed to read his thoughts, for he hastened to say:

"Nothing of the kind, young man—nothing of the kind! I am not here for such a purpose, but have come on a very friendly piece of business. I tell you the honest truth when I say that I do not believe you guilty."

"But you are a stranger," said Leon, slowly. "I do not know you."

"Ah, that is true," feeling hastily through his pockets. "And I have not a card with me. Well, never mind. I can introduce myself. I am Ross Bayal and am a detective by profession. I happened to be in Riverton on business and so heard of and became interested in this bank robbery."

But the fact that the man was a detective caused Leon to continue to be suspicious. The small man saw this, and laughed.

"That is right, keep on your guard, Mr. Norman," he advised. "It will do no harm, for I fancy you have foes, or a foe, working against you, and any careless word might be twisted and distorted till it would seem to mean something entirely different than you intended when you spoke it. But again I will assure you that I am not here for the purpose of making capital of your talk. You will have enough visitors who will come to see you for that purpose, for I understand that there are several newspaper reporters in town. But they will have you making all kinds of different talk even if you do not open your head."

There was something about the small man's free and easy manner that interested and amused Leon despite his suspicions, and so he asked the detective to sit down. Ross Bayal, as he had given his name, did not hesitate to accept the invitation, and within ten minutes after he took the chair he and Leon were chatting familiarly, the young farmer seeming to have forgotten his suspicions of a short time before. Without again arousing those suspicions, Ross Bayal skillfully led the conversation back to the bank robbery. In ten minutes more he knew the truth concerning the young farmer's whereabouts at the time that the robbery was supposed to have taken place. Once started, Leon poured forth the entire story of his misfortune.

Finally the detective asked:

"Mr. Norman, have you an enemy whom you suspect as having gotten you into this unpleasant predicament?"

"No, sir."

"Then you have no enemies in this vicinity?"

"Well—yes, I have one."

"Ah!" laughed the man in black. "I thought so."

"But I can hardly suspect him of having anything to do with my present unpleasant condition—it cannot be that he was instrumental in my apprehension and arrest."

"Don't be so sure of that; he may have been, for all you think not. What is this man's name?"

"Owen Durand."

"Just as I thought. He is a bad man to have for an enemy, Mr. Norman. Will you please tell me just what reason he has for being unfriendly to you?"

Leon hesitated, and looking square into the detective's frank face, he was convinced that the man did not wish to use the information against him, and so, with much hesitation, he told Bayal the truth concerning his and Durand's rivalry. The small man listened attentively and did not speak for several seconds after Leon had finished his story.

"Owen Durand would like to have you out of his path," Bayal finally observed.

"Without doubt."

"He has taken a very effective way of removing you and causing your disgrace at the same time."

"Then you think he is at the bottom of this business?"

"It looks like it."

"By heavens!" cried the young farmer, springing up and excitedly walking the room. "I begin to believe that you are right! Why, he attempted to draw a pistol on me when we met after he had frightened Della's horse and caused it to run away. Ha! I understand it now! That pistol-shot through the window, that came so near ending my life—Owen Durand fired it!"

A few questions from the detective brought out the facts concerning the shot which Frank Frisk, the little amateur detective, had seen fired. The bullet had passed within two inches of Leon's head and lodged in the wall.

"It was his work I now believe," declared Leon.

"I calculate that is near enough," smiled the little detective. "He failed that time, and so he put up another piece of dirt. Oh, I know him! He is a bad one."

"And what if he succeeds in this vile plot?" cried Leon. "It means disgrace and imprisonment for me! It means joy and triumph for him! It means sorrow and death for my poor—"

mother! Just God! can it be that that villain shall walk the earth a free man while I go to a convict's cell?"

"There, there, there," came calmly from Ross Bayal's lips. "Don't get excited, young man. Owen Durand will find considerable hard work before him before he gets you behind the bars."

"It is well enough for you to say, 'there, there, there!'" exclaimed the young man. "But if you were in my position, I reckon you would feel pretty nearly as I do. There is a possibility that I will be convicted, for all of the fact that I am innocent. I am afraid that the suspense will drive me mad!"

It was with considerable difficulty that Bayal succeeded in calming Leon, and for some time after the young man had again sat down, his hands trembled with suppressed excitement. For at least half an hour longer the little detective talked with the unfortunate fellow, and ere he went away he succeeded in convincing Leon that his case was not a desperate one at all.

"I am here on this Durand's trail," declared the detective, as he stood near the door. "He shall meet the punishment which he deserves. But, before I depart, let me caution you not to tell a soul that you suspect Durand of having anything to do with this business. It will be better for you if no one knows of your suspicion. Do not tell what has passed between us. Be careful."

"I will."

"And now good-by. Keep a good heart, for if nothing spoils my plans, Owen Durand shall soon take your place here, and you will be a free man."

"Heaven aid you!" came earnestly from Leon's lips.

And with one hearty handshake they parted, the detective going from the little room, but leaving a hopeful heart where he had found one that was near despairing when he entered.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BOUND BOY'S PERIL.

"HOPPING toads!"

Frank Frisk gasped those two words as his foot crashed through the ceiling. He heard the startled exclamations which came from the little room, and knew that the four men would soon seek to discover the cause of the unexpected noise. As soon as possible he sought to withdraw his leg from between the broken laths, but he was caught!

"Jingoes! here's a pickle!" thought the farm-lad. "I guess I'm in for it this time!"

He did not cease to struggle however, but his efforts were fruitless. The broken laths held him fast.

Open flew the door of the little attic room and a flood of light streamed out. Then a dark form filled the doorway, and a moment later strong hands grasped the unlucky boy by the shoulders, and a familiar voice cried:

"I have the spy! He seems to be caught fast in some kind of a trap."

He was in the grasp of Owen Durand!

Joel Hobbs appeared in the doorway, holding a lamp and peering forth in a dazed, frightened way. The light revealed the man and boy.

"You have quite sizable rats around your ranch, neighbor Hobbs," remarked the gambler, grimly. "It's lucky that you also have a trap that will catch and hold them."

"Great gosh!" gasped the farmer. "It's that infernal boy!"

With some difficulty Durand succeeded in freeing Frank's foot from the broken laths. Then the farm-lad decided that the time had come to make a desperate struggle. With a wild cry he leaped at the gambler's throat, striking, biting, and scratching. The suddenness of the attack came near making it successful; indeed, it was successful, for the boy broke away from Durand. Wheeling like a flash, he started to run, but he caught his foot on a loose board, and fell headlong with a crash. Before he could recover the gambler pounced upon him and dragged him into the little room.

"Hobbs, your rats have teeth and claws," observed the tall man, calmly.

"Drat his skin!" snarled the farmer, as he closed and fastened the door. "I'll larn him! I'll fix him for this!"

"Which will be perfectly proper," Durand admitted. "But I fancy that you will not want to fix the little brat when you know how he must be fixed."

"What do yew mean?"

"My dear Hobbs," came slowly and distinctly from the gambler's lips, "my meaning should be plain. What has this boy discovered?"

"Enough to put us all in the jug," declared the evil-faced man who was standing near a small table which occupied the center of the room.

"Right you are, partner," admitted the fourth one of the party, a short, thick, brutal-appearing fellow. "He has found out too much fer our healths."

"Exactly," came calmly from Durand's lips. "He knows enough to put the whole crowd where they would have a chance to play checkers with their noses. What's to be done?"

The four men looked into each other's faces and read one universal thought written on every countenance. Joel Hobbs grew ghastly white.

"What's to be done?" repeated the hard, even voice of the tall gambler.

"The brat must be put out of the way!" hoarsely declared the evil-faced man.

"Correct—he must die!"

Something which sounded like a choking groan came from Joel Hobbs. The farmer's face was the picture of horror.

"No, no!" he gurgled, hoarsely. "Yew sha'n't dew that—yew sha'n't! There hain't goin' tew be no murderin' done!"

"Don't be a fool, Hobbs!" snapped Durand. "Look on the table there. What do you see?"

The farmer's eyes followed the pointing finger and rested upon four piles of bank-notes, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

"You see the money which was stolen from the Riverton Bank," pursued the tall man.

"That boy has seen it! He knows where it came from! He was peering through a crack when his foot slipped and went through the ceiling. How much of our conversation has he heard? Who can tell? Hobbs, if that boy is not put out of the way, you and I go to prison!"

A cold sweat broke out all over the farmer's body and he trembled like a man with a chill. For several moments he could not speak, and, during all that time his three companions kept their eyes fastened upon him. Finally he managed to stammer:

"But yew mustn't—yew can't! It's terrible! I never bargained for this when I tole yew that yew might come here."

"No; but you are in the trap with the rest of us, and there's only one way out. You are willing enough to take your share of the boodle, and—"

"Hang the cursed munny!" whined Joel. "You know I'd never had ennythin' tew do with this scrape if yew hadn't coaxed me."

"That's poor talk to make now."

"But it's the trewth. An' even arter you coaxed me, I'd never had ennythin' tew do with it if yew hadn't tole me yew'd never ask me for ernuther cent an' yew'd never mention a certain piece of bisness tew a livin' soul. I was a fool tew git inter this fix! Here I am with them fellers bidin' in my house, an' if the gosh-darned 'tectives should find 'em here, I'd go tew prison. Great beeswax!"

"You should have thought of this before. There is no way to back water now. That boy knows your secret. While he lives you are not safe! You can see that he must die."

"Yas," growled the short, thick man, "he must die! I'll cut his wizzend!" and drawing a murderous-looking knife, he took a step toward the boy.

"Stop!" gasped Hobbs, springing between the man and his intended victim, his face ghastly white. "There hain't goin' tew be no blood-lettin' in this house!"

A snarl came from the lips of the man with the knife.

"Git out of my way!" he commanded, his eyes glowing with a terrible light, "git out of my way or I'll put this knife inter you ez fur ez it'll go!"

"Duran', Duran'!" cried the farmer: "I call on yew tew take him orf! If yew must murder the boy, don't for God's sake do it in this here house! Take him erway sumwhere! Yew'll leave marks here, an' yew may be heard by sumbuddy passin'. Stop him, Duran', stop him!"

The gambler stepped forward, saying sharply and swiftly:

"Then you consent to his being put out of the way? On that condition alone will I stop Handy. Before the sun rises again that boy must be dead and his body buried or concealed where it will never be found! You need have no hand in the job; we will attend to that. What do you say?"

"Anythin'," came faintly from Joel's lips, "anythin', only don't do it in my house."

"All right; it shall not be done in this house."

Then the gambler advanced swiftly to Frank's side and thrust a revolver against the farm-lad's head.

"If you utter a yawp, I'll scatter your brains all over this room!" he hissed. "Hobbs, get me a stout rope. Dan, make some kind of a gag."

Three minutes later the unfortunate boy lay on the floor, bound hand and foot and gagged so that it was impossible for him to utter anything more than a wheezing sound. Was the young amateur frightened? Any detective would have been in a similar position.

"And now," said Durand, "we'll let him lay there while we go on with our business."

But the farmer would not hear to it. He could not bear to have the boy, who was condemned to die, in the same room that he was. He could not keep his eyes away from the unfortunate lad, and he shuddered with horror every time he looked at him. After considerable talk, it was decided to place him in a room below and lock him in.

"He will be all right there," Joel declared. "He is tied so tight that he can't git erway; an' if he did git loose, he couldn't git out of the room."

"Hobbs, you're a chicken-hearted old fool!" sneered the gambler. "But, we'll humor you in this."

And so Frank was carried down the attic stairs and placed in a little room below. Then the men who had condemned him to death silently left the room and locked the door behind them.

The reader can imagine the horror of the farm-lad's position. Bound and gagged! Left alone in a dark room! Condemned to die! He groaned in agony and would have shrieked aloud, but the gag choked back his cries. He struggled like one mad as he sought to burst the cords which bound him, but it was a futile struggle.

A cold sweat broke out all over him and it seemed that he was strangling. He could scarcely breathe, and any one hearing the strange sounds which came from behind that cruel gag would have thought that he was truly choking.

After a time he became calmer. Then he prayed—oh, how he prayed for deliverance! Surely a kind Father in Heaven could not turn a deaf ear to such a supplication!

Hark! What was that?

He fancied that he heard a sound at the door. He listened with his heart in his mouth. For a time all was still; then he again heard a faint, cat-like sound at the door. That time he was sure of it. Something or some one was there! Had Heaven answered his prayer?

Ah! a sudden thought strikes him. Perhaps one of the four villains has stolen back to kill him and thus make a sure thing of the job! The short man with the knife! He feels sure that it is that man.

Slowly, stealthily, yet with a harsh, blood-chilling sound, the key turns in the lock. The assassin is about to enter the room! Frank's blood seems to turn to ice. He strains his ears and listens.

Creak! How the door squeaks as it slowly swings open! He can just see it as it moves. With a horrid fascination he watches it swing on its complaining hinges. He strains his eyes to catch a glimpse of the man who will murder him there in that dark room. Is that he? A dark shadow comes creeping through the doorway!

Once more the lad became frantic with fear. How he struggles to burst the cruel cords which hold him fast! How he tries to shriek aloud for help! Then a sudden faintness comes over him, and he closes his eyes and waits for death.

Slowly, softly, nearer and nearer comes a cat-like footstep! It is close beside him now, but he does not open his eyes. He feels that the assassin is bending over him; he fancies that the terrible knife is upraised. The man is going to strike!

What is that? A hand touched him near the throat! The fiend will make doubly sure that no outcry tells of the terrible deed. He feels something near his hands—a knife! Then something happens that he does not understand.

When he opens his eyes the shadow is gone and his hands and feet are free! He can scarcely believe his senses. In an instant the gag is torn from his mouth and he leaps to his feet. The door is still open. He rushes forward and peers out. Blank darkness! The shadow has vanished.

But he is free—free! And the road to liberty is open!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BOUND BOY'S FORTUNE.

It was nearly two hours later when the four villains within the attic, room were startled by hearing heavy footsteps on the loose boards of the attic followed by a heavy knock on the door.

"Open this door!" cried a commanding voice; "open in the name of the law!"

"Furies!" hissed Durand; "we are trapped!" The four men gazed into each other's faces and saw fear and rage written on every countenance.

"Open!" cried the voice beyond the door. "If you do not, we will break it down!"

"Thunderation!" spluttered Joel Hobbs, his face white as a sheet. "What can we do?"

"Fight!" hoarsely enjoined the short man, drawing the long knife; "fight for freedom!"

But, the farmer was too terrified to fight. With a howl of fear, he slunk into a corner. The others put themselves in a position of defense, and the one with the evil face called:

"Who is there and what do you want?"

"We are officers of the law and demand admittance," was the reply. "You cannot escape, for the house is surrounded."

With an oath, Durand sprung to the window and tore aside the heavy blankets which prevented the light from shining forth. As he did so a shot rung out and a bullet crashed through the glass, passing within two inches of his head. Then the men beyond the door hurled themselves against it and it fell with a sound of breaking boards. Several pistol-shots echoed through the old attic, then came darkness and a struggle.

Suddenly in the doorway, holding a light above his head, appeared the young amateur detective. The light revealed a strange scene. Farmer Hobbs had crawled as far into one corner as possible and was crouched there the very image of terror. Both of Durand's companions were lying on the floor with their hands confined behind them by manacles, while above them, a pistol in each hand, stood Ross Bayal, the detective! The deputy-sheriff from Riverton was examining a bleeding cut on his left shoulder. Owen Durand lay on his back groaning faintly, while above him towered the strange white-faced man.

"Hopping loads!" cried the boy with the light. "Scooped them all!"

"That is about the size of it," laughed Bayal. "But I reckon I have got an ugly cut here," observed the deputy-sheriff. "That short, thick-set little devil was the one who gave it to me."

"Have you captured the scoundrels?" inquired a timid voice behind Frank Frisk.

"Every one, judge," answered the detective. Frank advanced into the room and Judge Thaddeus Sheldon followed him closely.

"Ah, this is an excellent piece of work!" exclaimed the judge. "You seem to have done quite well without my aid, but I assure you I should have been on hand had not those stairs taken away my wind completely."

"Owen Durand," said the white-faced man, in a tone that drew the attention of every one, "look up. Do you know me?"

The gambler's answer was a groan.

"Owen Durand, I am your brother, Frank!" declared the white-faced man. "Do you hear? I am your brother—your own brother, who, at your instigation, has been confined for nearly sixteen years in a private mad-house! Think of that! Confined in a mad-house and placed there by one's own brother! Think of the fiendishness of such a deed! But, that is not all. You snatched me from the side of my fair young bride, and she died, thinking that I had deserted her. Gods! It is strange that I am not mad indeed! I married her secretly, for she was a poor girl and I knew that uncle would not countenance the marriage. The wedding took place miles from Riverton and we spent one short happy week together. Then I disappeared. Your hired tools did their work and I found myself within the walls of a mad-house."

"You know that Uncle George never liked you, but, with me out of the way, you hoped to gain possession of all his property. You schemed boldly, and your vile plots worked remarkably well. During the sixteen years that I have been confined within a mad-house you have been living on the property which our uncle left at his death, for he died shortly after my mysterious disappearance. Not one cent of that property was rightfully yours, for uncle never altered the will which left me everything and cut you off with nothing. The will by which you obtained possession of the property was a forgery—villain that you are—was your own base work."

"And, while I lay raving within a mad-house,

my poor wife traveled miles upon miles with our child in her arms, seeking for some trace of her husband. One winter night she came to the Riverton poor-house, and there she died. She sleeps in a pauper's grave, and the name upon the stone which charity erected is Sadie Frisk, her maiden name!"

Judge Sheldon started forward, crying: "Man, is this true? Are you indeed the lost Francis Durand?"

"I am indeed that unhappy man!"

"And this boy—Frank—he is your son?"

"He is, for I have learned beyond doubt that poor Sadie, my darling wife, died in the poor-house, leaving this boy there, from which place Joel Hobbs took him. Frank, my son, come to your father!"

In a moment the boy was clasped in his father's arms!

Owen Durand lifted his head with a groan.

"The game is played to a finish," he said, slowly; "and I am beaten. For some time I have felt that disaster was impending. It has come at last. All that my brother Frank has told you is true. For over fifteen years I have lived on what was rightfully his; but, the hour of retribution has come. There is not much of my uncle's property left, for I have gambled and squandered it all away. In fact, I was so hard up for money that I planned the Riverton Bank robbery that I might obtain some. Those two men, one of whom was connected with the so-called mad-house where Frank was confined, helped me carry out the scheme. Joel Hobbs was to have a part of the money if he would hide the two pals of mine till the excitement died away. But everything has gone wrong."

"And you have made a fool of yourself by blowing," snarled the evil-faced man. "We might have made a fight, but now it's the jug, sure."

"Not for me," said Owen Durand, quietly.

"I have been prepared for something of this kind for some time, and when I felt this bullet in my leg I knew that it was all up with me. Five seconds later I swallowed enough poison to kill half a dozen men. I am dying now!"

He spoke the truth, and in less than half an hour, despite all that was done for him, Owen Durand breathed his last. He had lived a wicked life, and his were the wages of sin—a wretched death!

In the excitement caused by the baffled plotter's declaration that he had taken poison, Joel Hobbs disappeared. He was never again seen in Riverton, but, some weeks later, Leon Norman received a letter from the farmer stating that he had done Leon's father a great wrong, and explaining the trick whereby, with Owen Durand's aid, he had defeated Zenas Norman in court. With the letter was a paper conveying one-half of Hobbs's property—which was held by his wife—to Leon Norman. All that was needed was Mrs. Hobbs's signature, which was readily obtained.

The two burglars, Durand's pals, went to jail, and at the next term of court they were given good long sentences. The cloud which had hung over Leon Norman's head was dispelled like mist before the sun; and when he walked forth a free man, it seemed to him that never before had he had so many friends. Every one was eager to grasp his hand, and the very ones who were the first to exclaim, "I told you so!" when he was arrested were also the first to repeat the expression when it was plain that he was innocent.

Judge Thaddeus Sheldon greeted the young man warmly. The judge was in excellent spirits, for, before he died, Durand had given him certain papers. These papers were nothing more nor less than promissory notes for an immense amount. How the notes came in Durand's possession the judge never explained; but, certain it is that he was very fond of cards, and sometimes played for large sums. The notes probably passed over a gaming-table when they first came into the gambler's possession.

The reader may imagine the meeting between the lovers, Leon and Della. Suffice it to say that, a short time later, the wedding-day was named. And no one was happier than Leon's mother, for to her he was all the world.

Francis Durand, with the aid of Ross Bayal, the detective, had cleared up the mystery of his imprisonment, which he had been unable to understand all the long years that he was in the so-called mad-house. Bayal was amply rewarded for his work.

Durand Hall and the wreck of a once magnificent estate went to the wronged brother, and there, with his father, "Frank Frisk," the young amateur detective—properly Frank Du-

rand—found a home. His entire life, thus far, had been one of misfortune, but his luck had changed at last!

And Mrs. Hobbs, who had released the farm-lad on the eventful night that the boy had been condemned to death, was not forgotten, by any means. She is still living in the old farm-house, and Frank is a constant visitor there. She is his second mother, who is never so happy as when his bright face appears at the door.

The kind-hearted woman declares that she does not now regret her sad and wretched life with Joel Hobbs, since it brought her her Bound Boy son.

And the Bound Boy, placing his arm around her waist, and looking lovingly into the care-marked but now happy face, says:

"I raised hob with Hobbs expressly to have you for my mammy, and now my mammy you shall be!"

THE END.

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